

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 2 **Apprentice Shrine
Maiden Vol. 1**

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





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Myne's Family



Myne

The protagonist, a daughter of a soldier who often collapses from fevers. She learned that her Devouring heat is mana and became an apprentice blue shrine maiden, a position normally restricted to nobles. She will do anything to read books.



Gunther

Myne's father, a captain at the south gate. He loves his family so much it makes everyone exasperated.



Effa

Myne's mother who works at a dye workshop. Always struggling to keep her loose-cannon husband and daughters under control.



Tuuli

Myne's older sister, an apprentice seamstress who is kind and takes care of others. According to Myne, she is "totally an angel."

Cast of Characters

Summary of Part One:

A girl who adores books named Urano was reincarnated as Myne, a poor and sickly child. The world has a low literacy rate and paper is too expensive to buy, so she set out on a quest to make her own books, and eventually made her own plant paper. Upon coming of age, she discovered a room of books in the local temple. She immediately decided to become an apprentice shrine maiden, both to get her hands on the books and to use the magic tools there to survive her mysterious illness known as the Devouring.

Gilberta Company



Lutz

An apprentice at the store. Myne's friend, partner in crime, and her reliable health manager.



Benno

The chief of the Gilberta Company and Myne's business mentor and guardian.



Corinna

Benno's younger sister and the heir to the store. She's a talented seamstress with her own workshop.

Mark

A lehrer (employee) at the store. Benno's skilled right-hand man.

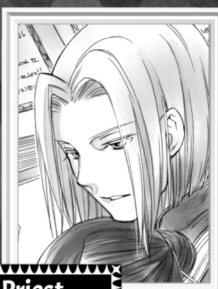
High Bishop

The highest authority in the temple. He hates the commoner Myne because she Crushed him with her mana.



High Priest

Myne's guardian in the temple. He values her talent in math and large amount of mana.



The Temple

Fran

Myne's attendant and a gray priest. Used to be one of the High Priest's top attendants.

Gil

Myne's attendant and an apprentice gray priest. A problem child assigned to Myne to spite her.

Delia

Myne's attendant and an apprentice shrine maiden. The High Bishop assigned her to Myne as a spy.

Deid.....Lutz's father.

Karla.....Lutz's mother.

Seig.....Lutz's second older brother.

Ralph.....Lutz's third older brother.

Hugo.....A chef hired by Benno.

Ella.....An apprentice chef hired by Benno.

Johann.....A skilled apprentice at the smithy.

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Prologue

“High Priest, the High Bishop is summoning you.”

“...Looks like that Crushing wasn’t enough to kill him.”

High Priest Ferdinand sighed and stood up after hearing the report from his attendant, Fran. He left his room with another attendant named Arno, while regretfully thinking about how much more work he would have been able to do had the High Bishop remained out of commission for longer.

Along the way to the High Bishop’s room, Ferdinand passed by the book room. It reminded him of Myne, the child who had caused a huge fuss in order to read the books within it. She was the source of his recent headaches, and the reason he was being called by the High Bishop. There was no doubt that he would be confirming what had happened with Myne and subsequently complaining about it. It was easy to imagine what kind of biting complaints would be coming out of the High Bishop’s mouth. Dealing with him was a pain, but as he was technically the highest authority in the temple, Ferdinand had no choice but to go along with it. He rubbed his temples and squashed his feelings of annoyance.

Ferdinand was often mistaken for a twenty-five-year-old, or a thirty-year-old at worst, but he was actually just twenty. His step-brother often said he lacked a youthful spirit, but personally, Ferdinand blamed his environment and upbringing.

Ferdinand was in a somewhat special situation. He hadn’t been raised from birth in the temple, but instead had been raised until adulthood in noble society. He was the son of a mistress, but as he excelled in his studies and had enough mana to work with the foundation’s magic device, he was raised to support his step-brother. They were close enough, but his brother’s mother — the wife of his father — was not fond of him even being relegated to a support role. After the death of his father, her rejection of him became more concrete and forceful. Power-seeking adults supported her, and his own mother could not be relied upon. When Ferdinand began to feel that he was in danger of losing his life, his step-brother recommended that he join the temple.

In noble society, joining the temple was equivalent to declaring your retirement from the world of politics. But as the temple also used mana and performed holy rituals, those within it actually maintained

a close connection to politics. The temple was run by blue-robed priests and shrine maidens from noble authority, and there was essentially another stratified society within the temple based on the status of their families.

Ferdinand's step-brother had jokingly asked him to take control of the temple for him. The current High Bishop was the younger brother of his mother and was a problematic existence for them both, due in part to his arrogance. Ferdinand shrugged his shoulders and said "Don't make it sound so simple," then joined the temple.

Life in the temple was peaceful. There were some people controlling matters of finance, some managing the orphanage, and some keeping tabs on noble society. But aside from pouring mana into the divine instruments, Ferdinand did not receive any special work. He had so much spare time that he even asked his step-brother to send some of the books and writing boards he had left at home. He placed several of the books into the book room so that less financially blessed nobles could read them as well. But the blue priests and shrine maidens in the temple were all those banished from noble society. Few of them had any interest in learning. The first to ever want to read the books, so much so that she burst into tears, was the young commoner girl Myne.

But the days of peace did not last long. The political war came to a close and a mass purging was carried out, dramatically decreasing the number of nobles. To bolster their numbers, kids young enough to attend the Royal Academy were summoned home, then shrine maidens young enough to get married were similarly summoned home. Eventually there was an order to send any and all priests and shrine maidens with significant mana to the Sovereignty's temple. Ehrenfest's temple now lacked any blue shrine maidens or blue priests young enough to be called home. All that remained were blue priests so weak in mana that the Sovereignty's temple didn't want them.

The temple lost everyone who had been doing the important jobs, which left Ferdinand to take over. He was young and had only recently joined the temple, but due to the status of his family, he was given the role of High Priest. Thus ended his days of peace.

"High Bishop, the High Priest has arrived." The attendant standing by the High Bishop's door opened it at a speed that matched Ferdinand's walking pace.

The High Bishop was sitting deeply in a chair and angrily tapping his fingers against his desk, his brows furrowed so deeply that his entire face was molded into an angry look. He spoke in a rush the moment he saw Ferdinand. "High Priest, what happened to her?"

After walking to the High Bishop's desk, Ferdinand asked "To whom do you refer?" while speaking gracefully like nobles tend to do.

“To that unbelievably rude brat, of course!” The High Bishop stood up and slammed a fist on his desk, shouting like a child throwing a tantrum.

Ferdinand had expected this and, under the guise of checking it, held up the wooden board containing his written report in order to block the spit flying in his direction.

“In accordance with our initial plans, she has entered the temple. We will undoubtedly struggle to perform the Dedication Ritual without Myne. On top of that, what will we do without her if the Knight’s Order needs our assistance in the fall? Will we refuse them, saying we lack the mana to do our job? Or will we beg other temples for help until more nobles arrive?”

The High Bishop had pride as high as the status of his family. He would never ask for outside help under any circumstances. He must have imagined himself bowing to High Bishops from the temples of other regions, because his entire head went red with frustration.

“Ngh! If not for our lack of mana, I would have that impertinent little girl executed immediately!”

“You would do well not to challenge her directly. If you are Crushed by that much mana again, your heart will likely not last.” Was he so mad that he had forgotten how he had been Crushed to the point of being knocked unconscious?

Old, prideful men never ceased to be tedious. So thought Ferdinand as he looked down at the High Bishop grinding his teeth and continued his report, explaining the terms he had discussed with Myne and her parents.

“As discussed prior, I prepared a pair of blue robes for her. Likewise, as discussed prior, she will maintain magic tools and be given work in the book room which she so desired to enter.” Ferdinand repeatedly emphasized that the terms were all what they had discussed prior to the incident. Perhaps due to his age, the High Bishop had a tendency to conveniently forget what he himself had said.

As expected, the High Bishop glared at Ferdinand, helplessly frustrated that there was no room for him to argue. “Ngggh... High Bishop, you...”

“Additionally, as Myne is not an orphan, she will commute to the temple from her home. I determined that this would not be a problem due to the number of blue priests doing the same.”

“You what?!” snarled the High Bishop, eyes wide. Once again, Ferdinand had predicted that reaction.

“...I made this decision after coming to the conclusion that she might otherwise ask for a room in the Noble’s Quarter, given her status as a blue robe.”

It was easy for the High Bishop to understand that letting Myne commute from home was better than giving her a room in the Noble's Quarter. He nodded with a nasty smile. Naturally, he had completely forgotten that he had suggested throwing her into the orphanage before, but it was too late for him to backpedal now.

"In addition, Myne is sickly by nature and will not be able to work every day. There is not much work for an apprentice blue shrine maiden to do, so I believe it will be fine if she rests on days where she is of poor health."

"Bah. Seems like she's as lazy as she is rude." The High Bishop seemingly felt the need to complain about everything, but Ferdinand already knew that, and thus brushed off his whining with a light shrug.

"It is better than her carrying illness into the temple. Additionally, I have given her attendants so that they may watch her health."

"She doesn't need them!" His replies were so consistent with what Ferdinand had predicted that he sighed while giving yet another prepared answer.

"We will experience problems of our own if there is an apprentice blue shrine maiden without attendants. Not to mention that we are currently overflowing with grays. Nothing but good will come from Myne being given some of them."

Many blue priests and shrine maidens had left, but excluding particularly well-liked ones, the majority of gray-robed attendants had been released from their duties and put back in the orphanage. With fewer donations as well, the idle gray priests were an unacceptably large drain on the temple's slim finances.

"In addition, according to my investigation, Myne has been registered as the forewoman of a workshop registered with the Merchant's Guild. It is easy to say that those serving the gods need not make money, but if she continues her work, we will be able to receive regular income through no work of our own. What do you think?"

The lack of noble priests and shrine maidens led to the High Bishop having less money he could use on himself, so he said "Squeeze as much out of her as you can," thereby giving implicit permission for Myne to continue her work. Ferdinand let out a sigh of relief. All the conditions Myne's family had demanded had been approved.

"In that case, I will take full responsibility for Myne such that you do not need to trouble yourself with her. She will be forbidden, in general, from entering your room. I will also attach one of my own gray attendants to her so that I can receive more detailed reports on her actions."

Ferdinand showed that he was on guard against Myne as well,

which made the High Bishop's eyes gleam with interest. He stroked his white beard and smiled in the nasty way he always did when planning something nefarious.

"Oh? In that case... I will attach an attendant of my own to her. Delia is around the same age as her, which will be perfect for this purpose. The brat will surely trust her. Also, attach one of the troublemaker orphans to her as a final attendant. See to it that she struggles each day. Squeeze out as much money and mana from her as possible. That's all she's good for, in any case."

That was not ideal. Ferdinand had intended to attach one of his best attendants to Myne, since she lacked knowledge of noble society and how the temple worked, but with the High Bishop attaching a spy to her, he would be exposed as well. He bowed and left the room, feeling bitter, then returned to his own room.

"Good gods, he is a pain."

The majority of blue priests and shrine maidens in any temple were bastard children — illegitimate children such as Ferdinand — but the High Bishop was a legitimate child and felt pride for his high-status family. The reality behind that, however, was that he had been sent to the temple due to an overwhelming lack of mana despite his heritage. As a result, he had an intense inferiority complex toward those with a large amount of mana. If Ferdinand did not keep a close eye on how the High Bishop treated Myne, it was possible that her mana would rampage once again.

According to the guildmaster's report, Myne had gotten a temporary apprentice registration at the Guild with the Gilberta Company's backing. She then began inventing all manner of products: rinsham, plant paper, hairpins, and pound cake. It seemed that she hadn't lied when she claimed to have enough money on hand to donate a large gold. She gave up on being a merchant's apprentice due to her poor health and intended to use the Myne Workshop prepared by the Gilberta Company to continue inventing and selling products.

In other words, Myne had more than just mana and money — she had a degree of management skill. Ferdinand was so swamped with work that Myne would be much more useful to him than the High Bishop.

"Still though, she invented this many products within merely a year of registering...?" The Myne Workshop seemed like it would be reaping enormous profits soon. Ferdinand would need to assign an attendant to her that would give detailed reports on her behavior, so that he could ensure that she would not be tricked by a greedy merchant.

He looked around at the attendants in his room. He would want an attendant loyal to him, accurate in reports, and highly patient to

serve Myne. The attendant would also need to deal with the annoying spy the High Bishop would attach to her.

“Fran, I will assign you to be Myne’s attendant. Give as detailed reports on her and her actions as possible. Additionally, do what you can to prevent Myne and the High Bishop from meeting.”

“...Understood.” Fran briefly frowned with worry, then nodded quietly.

“As for her other attendant... Hm. Are there any gray robes who are difficult to deal with, who you would hesitate to assign as an attendant? I will need to implement at least some of the High Bishop’s input, for appearance’s sake.”

As he thought about it, Fran’s eyes wavered and then lowered to the floor. Arno, the attendant that Ferdinand had brought with him to the High Bishop’s room, threw out a helping hand.

“What about Gil? He is quite often sent to the repentance chamber, and his supervising priest complains that he never learns.”

“...Interesting. In that case, I will assign Gil, Delia, and Fran to be Myne’s attendants.”

Attendants and the Fealty Ceremony

...After today, I'll be an apprentice shrine maiden.

It took many days to prepare each set of blue robes, so despite having been baptized with Lutz, I began my apprentice work a month later. I was super excited to go to the temple, and every second I had to wait felt like forever.

...I'll finally, finally be able to read books! And books that are chained up, too! Aaah, just thinking about it makes me tremble with excitement! Gyahaha! As I rolled around on my bed blissfully, Tuuli came calling for me.

"Myne, Lutz is here to get you. Um... Why are you dancing?"

"Because I get to read books! Bye bye, Tuuli. See you later!"

"Myne, try not to get too excited."

Don't ask for the impossible, silly! I replied in my head and dashed outside. The temple was in the north part of the city, so I was wearing the best clothes I had, my Gilberta Company apprentice uniform. I figured they'd be good enough to tide me over until I got my blue temple robes.

"Eheheh, ahahaha." I started to skip along the road while humming, only for Lutz to grab my arm and pull me back with an exasperated look on his face.

"Myne, c'mon, you're getting too excited. You'll catch a fever before we reach the temple."

"Awww... I don't want that." I steeled my springy legs to stop myself from skipping and swallowed my urge to walk as fast as possible, hating that my body was too weak for me to even get excited and be happy. Instead I headed to the temple slowly, holding hands with Lutz.

"Myne, are you really gonna be okay on your own?"

"Today they're just giving me a robe and introducing me to my attendants, it'll be fine."

I would be going to the temple on basically the same days that Lutz had work. My family and Benno had decided that Lutz should keep watching over me until the attendants assigned to me understood how my body worked. *I really don't think anyone but Lutz will be able to manage my health this well, though...*

Maybe they were hoping that Lutz would stick with me forever. My family, Benno, Mark, Lutz, and basically everyone was extremely

wary of the nobles in the temple. But if I kept relying on Lutz forever, then there would have been no point in me abandoning my apprentice merchant job to lessen his burden.

I told Benno that, but he just snorted, and Mark then explained with a conflicted smile. It seemed that Lutz was being directly taught by Mark so they could sooner help open an Italian restaurant here and open paper-making workshops in other cities.

The lessons were apparently fairly unorthodox since Lutz was their way of contacting the inventor — me. He would be participating in the construction of new businesses and learning to be a merchant through personal experience in the field. When I commented that this wasn't the normal process for a new hire, I was told that this was being done in part since Lutz wanted to go to other cities as soon as possible.

...Well, if Lutz is happy, I'm happy. Good luck, Lutz!

When we reached the gate, we found a gray priest waiting for us. He was a relatively younger man who, upon seeing us, gracefully got onto one knee and crossed his hands in front of his chest.

"Good morning, Sister Myne. I will guide you to the High Priest."

"Sister Myne?! Pff, hahaha! That doesn't fit you at all." Lutz burst into laughter at the polite gray priest's respectful attitude, cackling as he looked between us.

I wanted to laugh with him, but I noticed the priest's brows briefly furrow, so I gently smacked Lutz on the back as he bent over in laughter. "Lutz, you're laughing too much!"

"Yeah, sorry, sorry. I'll come get you after fourth bell, Myne." Lutz started walking off, and I waved him goodbye before turning back to the gray priest.

"Sorry for making you uncomfortable."

"...There is no need for you to apologize to me. More importantly, the High Priest is waiting." He looked away and rejected my apology. As I blinked in surprise, he turned his back to me and started walking away.

The gray priest's wooden shoes drummed against the white stone hallway as he walked. Nothing else broke the heavy silence that weighed on me as I speedwalked to keep up with him.

After turning a corner in the hallway, I began hearing something other than shoes. I looked up on instinct toward the sound and saw some girls cleaning the hallway. They were gray shrine maidens that hadn't been present at the baptism ceremony, and they didn't look very clean. Not because they were cleaning or because their clothes were dirty, either. They just had a dirtier atmosphere to them than the gray priest walking in front of me, perhaps due to having worse hygiene or bathing less in general. When they saw the gray priest,

they stopped cleaning and retreated to the walls of the hallway before lowering their eyes.

...Is that a show of respect or something? I was hidden behind the gray priest, judging by the shrine maidens' looks of shock after noticing me, which made it clear they weren't doing that for me. Seeing that there was a status structure within the orphan gray priests as well made unease spread through my chest. I really had stepped into a world with an entirely different power balance than my own. I had never interacted with nobles in my prior lifestyle. Everyone lived in basically the same situation, and even after I started dealing with a rich merchant, he treated me as an equal thanks to the value of my products.

...But will I be okay here? Am I going to make a huge mistake and mess everything up since I'm not used to class-based societies? My anxious footsteps echoed throughout the quiet hallway. I now knew I had stepped into a world I couldn't imagine, even with my experience from my Urano days.

"High Priest, I have brought Sister Myne," said the gray priest. I was so not used to being called "Sister Myne" that it felt like he was talking about someone else entirely. I was a kid and a commoner, nobody special, but now an adult gray priest was respectfully calling me Sister Myne. It felt so weird that it made me uncomfortable. But since I was going to be given blue robes and treated like a noble here, I couldn't ask him to drop the "sister" and just call me Myne. I would just have to get used to it.

"Excuse me." I bowed my head a little bit out of habit as I entered the High Priest's room. For some reason, there was a simple altar in the middle of the room. I could tell at a glance that it was a simplified version of the multi-step altar covered in statues I had seen during the baptism ceremony.

On the top of this three-step altar was the black cape and golden crown that decorated the statues on the top of the actual altar. On the second step was the staff, spear, chalice, shield, and sword. The first step had flowers, fruit, bells, incense, and so on with a pair of blue robes carefully folded by the side. There was a blue carpet rolled out in front of the altar, which made it hard not to think about the baptism ceremony prayers.

This altar hadn't been there when I last went to the High Priest's room. As I stopped in the doorway and began digging through my memories, the High Priest paused his work to stand up and walk in front of the altar.

"Come here, Myne."

I hastened over to the High Priest. He looked down at me with his light golden eyes and, after a sigh, looked at the altar.

“Under normal circumstances, you would vow to serve the gods and temple before the altar in the High Bishop’s room before being bestowed your robes, but as he does not want you to enter his room, I had another one built here as soon as possible.”

“...Sorry for making you do that.” Thanks to me getting ticked off by the High Bishop’s arrogant attitude and cruelty, my mana had gone crazy with emotion. Personally I felt better afterwards, but it made sense that the High Bishop would hold a grudge against me for Crushing him with my mana.

...Not to mention that he already looked down on me for being a poor commoner. With the highest authority in the temple already hating me with no chance of forgiveness in sight, I was probably in a pretty bad situation. As I started to wonder if I had a hard life ahead of me in the temple, the High Priest shook his head.

“You need merely avoid meeting the High Bishop wherever possible, so as to not add fuel to the fire.” The High Priest knew the High Bishop a lot better than I did, so if he said I should avoid him, I probably should. I nodded in reply. I didn’t want to go out of my way to see him anyway.

“Now then, let us begin the fealty ceremony.” The High Priest picked up the incense burner by its chain and swung it gently like a pendulum. Smell wafted out of it and into the air as it swung, filling the room with a calming scent.

The High Priest then began telling me about the divine instruments enshrined on the altar. The black cape on top signified the night sky and was the symbol of the God of Darkness. The gold crown signified the sun and was the symbol of the Goddess of Sunlight. The betrothed gods were known as the king and queen of the heavens, so they were at the top of the altar.

The staff on the second step was the symbol of the Goddess of Water melting snow and ice into running water, the spear was the symbol of the God of Fire encouraging growth to ever greater heights, the shield was the symbol of the Goddess of Wind pushing back the cold winter wind, the chalice was the symbol of the Goddess of Earth accepting everyone and everything, and the sword was the symbol of the God of Life digging into the hard ground. The bottom step had offerings for the gods. Plants symbolizing fresh life, fruit celebrating growth, cloth reflecting faith, and so on.

“The divine color of spring is green. It is the color of young life, sprouting after the harsh winter. The divine color of summer is blue. It is the color of the tall sky that life strives for. The divine color of autumn is yellow. It is the color of heavy wheat and bountiful fruit ripening. The divine color of winter is red. It is the color of the furnace, lessening the cold and granting hope.”

It seemed that the color revered within the temple changed according to the season. The cloth on the altar, the carpet, the ornaments worn on top of the blue robes, and so on all had their color determined by the season.

“Now, your vow.” The High Priest, facing the altar, knelt on the carpet with his left foot planted forward and forming a right angle. He then crossed his arms across his chest and drooped his head. I made the same pose beside him.

Once I was done, he continued. “Repeat after me.”

I looked closely at the High Priest’s mouth, not wanting to mess anything up. He moved his slender lips slowly so as to make his words easier to understand during the vow.

“O mighty King and Queen of dark and light, most righteous and divine rulers of the wide heavens.”

“O splendid gods of the Eternal Five, most righteous and divine rulers of the vast mortal realm.”

“Goddess of Water, Flutrane.”

“God of Fire, Leidenschaft.”

“Goddess of Wind, Schutzaria.”

“Goddess of Earth, Geduldh.”

“God of Life, Ewigeliebe.”

“King and Queen, show your divine power that extends throughout the wide heavens and vast mortal realm.”

“Eternal Five, bless we of the vast mortal realm with your divine power.”

“In eternal gratitude for your heavenly powers, I shall worship thee for eternity.”

“I shall live with just hearts, calm hearts, and resolved hearts. I shall have faith in thee as the true and just gods.”

“I vow that I shall pray to thee, gods of nature; I shall thank you, and I shall prepare offerings for thee.”

I looked up at the High Priest, having repeated what he said word for word. He nodded, apparently pleased with my performance, before standing up and looking at the gray priests by the wall. The priests closest to the altar moved silently, picked up the blue robes on the bottom step of the altar, and handed them to the High Priest.

“Blue encourages growth. It is the divine color of the God of Fire, and it is the color of the wide sky, where the King and Queen rule. I give these robes to you, she who worships the King and Queen, she who swears to grow as the years go on.”

I was given the robes, then changed into them by an apprentice shrine maiden. The blue robes were easy to put on; they slipped over my clothes from above and had to be tied on only with a sash by my waist. I could wear whatever clothes I liked beneath it, and during

rituals or ceremonies, I just had to put on various religious ornaments on top of them.

“Myne, honorable apostle sent to us by the gods. We welcome you among us.” The High Priest bent his knees and crossed his arms in front of his chest. I copied him and crossed my arms too.

“I am deeply grateful that you would welcome me.”

“Then let us pray.”

It was so sudden that I didn’t know what he meant. With my arms still crossed, I tilted my head in confusion. His brows furrowed in frustration at my poor comprehension.

“You learned the method at your baptism ceremony, did you not? Pray to the gods.”

*Oh... The Gl*co pose. That’s right. Now that I’m in the temple, I’ll need to do that every day pretty much. Well... I hope my sides will be okay.*

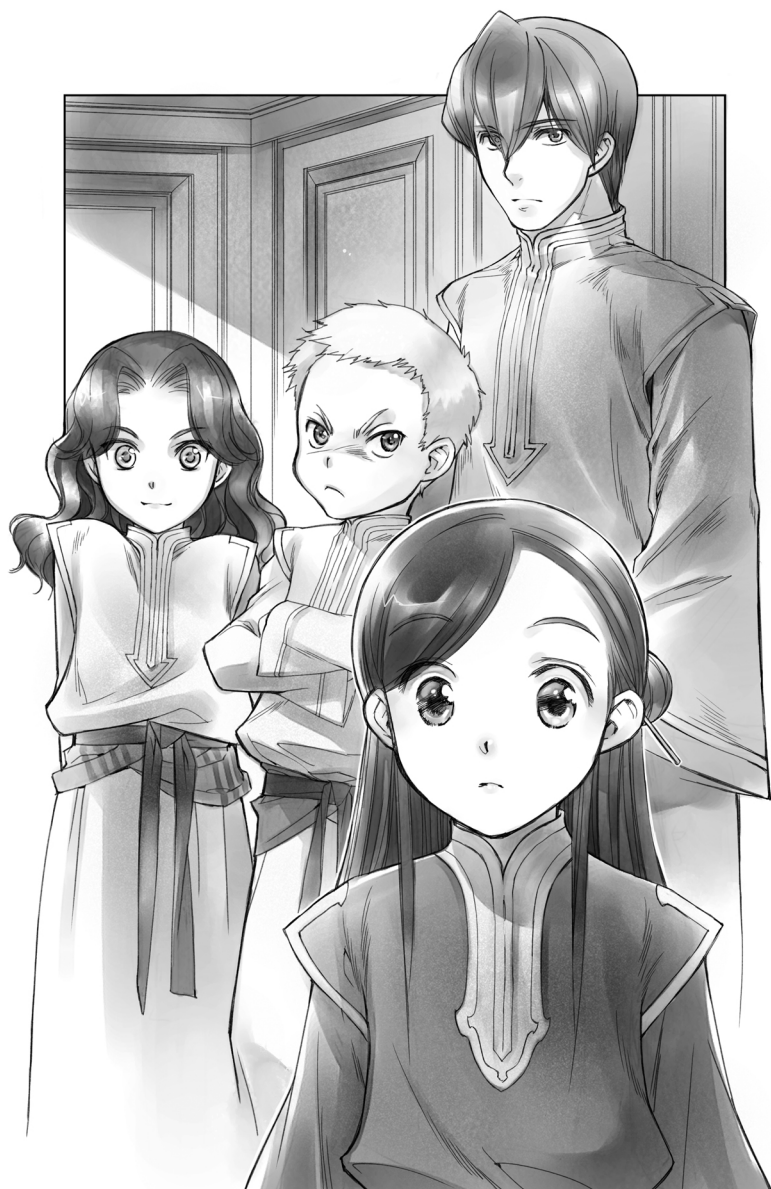
Memories of my sides getting destroyed at the baptism ceremony passed through my mind, but I shook my head and tensed my stomach so I wouldn’t burst into laughter. The High Priest’s doubting eyes pierced me, making it clear he was about to question whether I had forgotten what to do. So, I began praying.

“P-Praise be to the gods...! Ah?!” It was surprisingly difficult to maintain the Glic* pose. I had to carry my whole weight with one leg while staying balanced. Unable to make a beautiful Gl*co pose like the priests at the ceremony, I swayed side to side in a fairly unsightly way.

“That won’t do. You will one day be participating in the Spring Prayer. What good is a shrine maiden that can’t pray? Learn to pray before the next prayer ceremony.”

“Ngggh... I’ll do my best.”

The High Priest sighed, shook his head, and looked at the gray priests lined up along the wall. “I will introduce you to the gray priest and apprentices who will be your attendants,” he said, which signaled three of the gray robes to walk to the front of the altar. One was an adult man, and the other two were a boy and a girl about my age.



Surprisingly enough, the gray priest that had guided me to my room was in fact my attendant. He looked to be of above-average height, about as tall as Dad. He had light-purple hair and deep brown eyes that gave off the impression of a fairly serious person who generally kept quiet. His expression was solemn and obedient. It felt like it might be difficult to get to know him.

"I am Fran, seventeen years old. I will be in your care."

"No no, if anything I'm going to be in *your* care." I tried to reply politely, but the High Priest immediately launched a sharp rebuke.

"Myne. You are a blue robe. Do not deprecate yourself before gray robes."

"S-Sorry. I'll be careful." I didn't get status-based societies. My life experience wouldn't help me know what was good or bad to do here. I would need to claw my way to understanding my environment just like I had after first becoming Myne. As I was struck with worry, I saw an attendant who seemed like he would be an even bigger concern stand in front of me.

He was roughly as tall as Lutz, but perhaps due to not being fed enough, he had a nasty look in his eyes and seemed unnaturally thin. He had dirty blonde hair and although his eyes looked black at first, a closer look revealed purple eyes. My first impression of him was that he looked like a little punk. To be honest, I wasn't too good at dealing with people like him.

In my Urano days I stayed holed up inside my room reading, and in my Myne days I'm stuck in bed with sickness all the time, so I was a shut-in through and through. Violent... or rather, rough boys full of energy and nasty things to say were just not people I wanted to be around. *I doubt that we'll ever be able to be friends*, I thought to myself while looking at the boy. He was blatantly looking me over too, from head to toe as if appraising my worth.

"I'm Gil. Ten years old. You're supposed to my master? This sucks. You're a friggin' little kid." *Um... What? Are attendants supposed to act like this?* Surprised by his mocking look and nasty words, my mouth flapped open and closed. Once again, the High Priest launched a rebuke. But not at Gil — at me.

"Myne, Gil is your attendant. You must reprimand him when he behaves improperly."

"Bwuh? Me?"

"Who if not you, his master?" *Um... He's saying that like it's really normal, but what does he expect me to do? This kid doesn't seem like the type to care about being scolded.*

"Um, could you be a little more polite?"

"Hah! Are you friggin' stupid?!"

The High Priest was shaking his head with a critical look on his face, but really, the fault here was in whoever selected Gil to be my attendant. My stomach fell when I realized that him being chosen was likely an act of harassment. There was no doubt that Gil had been selected to spite me. It was hard to imagine that Gil would ever be an obedient servant. Someone had probably forced him onto me, a commoner, so they didn't have to deal with him themselves, while simultaneously making life harder for me. With that in mind, I'd have to be dumb to take him seriously and be polite. I just had to deal with him the same way I dealt with the mean boys in class: Ignoring him.

I lifted a hand to interrupt Gil and shifted my attention to the only girl among the attendants. She had deep red hair and light-blue eyes. She was wearing a kind of smug smile, but she had a beautiful face. Not cute; beautiful, like a pretty adult woman. It felt kind of like she was someone who understood her appearance and knew how to butter up men with flattery and flirting. ...*That's just the kind of thing I notice as a fellow girl, I guess.*

"I'm Delia. Eight years old. Let's be friends, okay?" Despite suggesting that we be friends, Delia's eyes weren't smiling at all. She had probably sensed that we weren't cut from the same cloth and was already shifting into subtle hostility. But still, the brightly smiling Delia seemed to have the High Priest's silent approval. He didn't launch any rebukes this time.

None of the attendants seemed friendly at all, and it was hard to imagine things would go well with even a single one of them. Just being near them would probably be exhausting.

"Um, High Priest. I've lived without any attendants up until now, and even without these three, I can..."

"No. It is the duty of blue robes to have attendants. These attendants were hand-selected by the High Bishop and myself. Now that you have worn your blue robes, you must act like a proper master, one suitable for their loyalty."

"I see. Understood." *So... I can't say I don't want them? I don't even have a choice here? I feel like my life as an apprentice shrine maiden in the temple is already falling apart.*

A Shrine Maiden's Job

"Thus ends the fealty ceremony."

"Okay, I'm off to the book room."

"Stop. We're not done here." At the High Priest's direction, I left the altar and moved to the front of his desk. Fran brought me a chair, so I sat down.

"Thank you, Fran."

"...Your gratitude is wasted on me." Fran grimaced a little, looking surprised. Maybe it was wrong for me to thank my attendants. It would probably be smart to ask Freida about how to act like a noble.

"Are you ready to listen?"

"Yes, go ahead." I wasn't sure what they were for, but the High Priest's desk was covered with stacks of wooden boards and pieces of parchment. He looked over a few of them and glanced at me. He was acting entirely like a teacher with a textbook lecturing a student.

"As you know, all the blue robes in the temple are of noble birth. You should operate under the assumption that none of them are pleased with a commoner such as yourself wearing blue robes as well."

I had guessed that myself, but hearing it said to my face sent a chill down my spine. When I first asked about being an apprentice shrine maiden, I had half a year of life ahead of me at best. I would have been happy if I could just read books in the book room until I died. But the temple had magic tools. By becoming a blue apprentice shrine maiden, my lifespan had been extended, and my life in the temple no longer had a time limit. I would need to think hard about my future, and not through a lens of self-destruction.

"At the moment there are few enough blue nobles that everyone understands our need for those with mana, so their hostility will likely end with them ignoring you. But that will not last when more noble children come to the temple. You would do well to plan ahead."

I clenched my fists in my lap and bit my lip. If I messed up when dealing with nobles, my whole family would be affected. I needed information to survive in the temple safely.

"In particular, the High Bishop was opposed to allowing even this fealty ceremony. The other blue robes have not met you, so their feelings will be founded on their scorn for commoners. For this reason, I have elected to take on the role of your overseer myself."

I, as a commoner who had both mana and money despite my low status, basically stomped on the nobility's sense of pride and privilege just by existing. No way would any of them like me. I knew that. But despite saying that nobles wouldn't like me, the High Priest was being quite kind warning me about all this.

"Do you not dislike me yourself, High Priest?"

"I value those with competence. At the moment my workload has increased due to the lack of priests and shrine maidens. I know that you, skilled with paperwork as you are, will be helping lessen that load. Why would I despise you?" He let out a laugh, and the dark smile on his face made me freeze.

The fact that he knew I was good at paperwork meant that he had finished the investigation he had mentioned before. He already knew more about me than I might ever know. I now lived in a world that didn't even know the meaning of "privacy protection." As a noble, if the High Priest asked for information, any commoner would give it to him on the spot. Just what did he know about me now? It was scary to think about.

"I'll do my absolute best, but what work will you be giving me? If there's something I should be doing, please tell me."

"Of course. Your work, primarily, is serving as my assistant and helping complete my paperwork. This is your most important job. You will be doing paperwork here throughout the morning. Next is prayer and offerings. As a shrine maiden, you will need to learn to pray properly."

"I understand prayer, but what do you mean by offerings?"

"Pouring mana into the divine instruments. Fran, the shield."

Fran nodded and returned with a shield about fifty or sixty centimeters in diameter. It was circular, seemingly made of gold, and carved with such elaborate reliefs that its status as a divine instrument was immediately obvious. In the center was a bright yellow gem about as big as my palm, wavering a bit on the inside as if it contained burning fire. The outside ring of the shield was studded with similar gemstones about as big as marbles. Half those gems were yellow, whereas the other half were clear like crystals.

"Touch the magic stone in the center. Envision yourself pouring your own mana into it."

Apparently it was a magic stone, not a gemstone. With my heart trembling with excitement at how fantasy-like that was, I touched the stone with my right hand, which made the entire shield start to glow a golden color. The text carved into the shield let out yellow-green light and floated about a wrist's length from the shield, though I had never seen the letter-like symbols before and couldn't read them.

...Woow, it's like a magic circle! So cool, so cool! I tried reading the

mysterious shining symbols, my heart racing with curiosity, when suddenly I felt something like the heat inside of me being sucked out by a vacuum cleaner. It was the same thing I felt when Freida used a magic tool to save me when the Devouring had me on the verge of death.

Figuring that I may as well go all out, I opened up the metaphorical box I always pushed my mana into. The Devouring heat flooded out, raced to my palm, and got sucked into the stone. I entrusted myself to the pleasurable feeling of the annoying heat getting sucked out, but soon snapped back to my senses.

...*This isn't going to break the shield, is it?* I remembered how I had broken Freida's magic tool and, getting scared, reflexively pulled my hand back. I then squashed the slightly reduced mana back inside of me. I had only let out mana for a short period of time, but still, I felt a lot better. Like a heavy stone on my back had been lifted.

"Hm. Seven minor magic stones' worth, then." The High Priest's musings made me look at the shield, and I saw that more of the small magic stones were yellow than before. Apparently they changed color when filled with mana. You could tell at a glance how much mana was left inside of it.

...Somehow, it felt like I had become a portable battery charger.

I opened and closed my right hand, which I had used to pour in the mana. *The Devouring heat really is mana, wow. It's surprisingly easy to control when there's a clear exit for it,* I thought, and soon the High Priest peered down at me with a somewhat worried look on his face.

"Myne, how do you feel?"

"Ummm, a little relieved? It feels like I'm lighter than before."

"...I see. Be sure not to overburden yourself when offering your mana."

It seemed that recharging divine instruments with mana would be pretty easy work. The praying would be the hard part, since standing on one foot was hard for me in my current body. Especially since I couldn't hold out my arms to maintain balance, as I had to hold them diagonally upwards. I could imagine that I would receive strict instruction on the angles of my arms and how long I should maintain the position.

"And finally, your last job is to read the bible and memorize its contents," concluded the High Priest in a fairly quiet voice, but my ears perked up immediately. Read the bible and memorize it. I wasn't too confident in my memory, but reading it? Leave that to me.

"I'll do it! Let's go to the book room right now!" I stood up and shot my hand into the air to show the High Priest how enthusiastic I was. But the High Priest didn't even look at me, instead choosing to pick up another piece of parchment and skim it.

“Before that, I would like to discuss the matter of your donation. Please sit. Arno, my ledger.”

Money discussions were very important. I had been curious about the subject of my donation too, since I had offered to pay such an abnormally high amount. Mainly, I was curious as to how I would pay and where it would go.

“You said that you would donate a large gold, as I recall.” The High Priest gave me a light glare.

I recalled a discussion I had with Benno. He said something about there being a ceremony held several times throughout the year where the Merchant’s Guild gathered money to donate to the temple, though he had never donated directly himself. He also said, what was it...

“You’ll stick out in a bad way if you pay that much. How ’bout you split it up and pay in bits? A rich idiot handing out too much money too fast is just gonna annoy everyone.”

“Ummm, if you demand I pay that much, I will, but I think it would be better if I donated a small gold coin every month.”

“We do not dictate how much one should donate, so that is possible if you so wish, but what reason do you have for doing so?”

“A wise person I know told me that if I suddenly paid the full amount, people might be overwhelmed by the large sum and start spending more money than they otherwise would have. Well, either way, I want to discuss it with you first, since you know all about the temple’s finances and how donations work and so on.”

Naturally, I didn’t reuse Benno’s exact words. But the High Priest understood what I meant and thought for a bit, then sighed.

“Half of every donation is spent on the temple’s upkeep, whereas the other half is distributed to the blue priests. The amount given to each priest depends somewhat on their status. As the one that manages this, I think you would do well to donate five small golds at first and then donate the remainder over the following months one small gold at a time.”

“Why that much specifically?” I tilted my head in confusion, and the High Priest held out a bundle of parchment to me. I ran my eyes over it and learned that it was part of his ledger. I blinked in surprise and he pointed at a part of them.

“The temple’s income can be broadly separated into funding from the Archduke, donations gathered during certain ceremonies, and finally, financial support from the families of blue priests. This means that fewer blue priests results in less income. To put it in terms easy for a merchant to understand, the temple is currently operating in the red. For this reason, the High Bishop was yelling about squeezing money out of you. It would be a significant help to me if you were to donate a large sum at once to satisfy him.”

I got the feeling he was kind of spilling a lot of secrets to me. Was it really okay for me to know that the temple was losing money?

“Ummm, High Priest. Is that something you’re supposed to be telling me?”

“Your work will involve these issues in a matter of days, telling you now impacts nothing.” It seemed that while helping the High Priest I wouldn’t just be doing the math like I was with Otto, I’d be sticking myself head-first into the temple’s inner workings.

“...Okay. How should I give you the money? I usually use my guild card to transfer money, but I don’t think you have one.”

“You need merely bring it here, no?” He made that sound simple, but I really had only ever dealt with large sums of money through my card. I had never held any gold coins with my own hands. As a kid, walking from the Merchant’s Guild to the temple with that much money on me was terrifying.

“That might be easy for you since you’re used to dealing with money, High Priest, but that’s way too much for me to carry. The very idea is scary.”

“What in the world do you think your attendants are for?”

Um... Wait. Attendants? I reflexively turned around and looked at the attendants lined up behind me. No way would I entrust that much money to these maliciously picked meanies. Well, Fran would probably obey if I framed it as an order from the High Priest, but Delia and Gil would probably waste the money on something to spite me. Judging by their attitudes toward me, I couldn’t yet trust them as attendants.

“I don’t want to involve other people and then be responsible for mixups, like the Guild saying they gave the money but the attendant saying they didn’t get the money.”

“...Do you not trust your attendants?” he said, confused, which made me confused as well. Are nobles capable of trusting strangers who clearly don’t like them, to the point of having them carry around gold coins for them? Or maybe the attendants were bound by some kind of contract magic that prevented them from betraying me. I thought back to when the attendants were introduced to me, but I was pretty sure we hadn’t signed a contract or anything. Magic contracts involved blood, and that wasn’t something I would forget.

“You’re calling them my attendants, but to me, they’re strangers who I have no control over. How could I trust them with that much money? That’s beyond me.” *I mean, they’re not even friendly or anything. No way, no way. Compared to these three, I would much rather trust the guildmaster, even.*

Personally, there weren’t many adults I would trust with money. Maybe I could get Benno or Mark to come here. The High Priest was a

noble, so Benno would probably agree on the basis of forming connections. That would be nice.

"I would like an adult I can trust that's used to dealing with large sums of money to bring the donation. Would you permit him to enter the temple on my behalf?"

"Who is this adult?"

"Mr. Benno of the Gilberta Company, the one who's serving as my guardian in the business world."

"...Hm. Very well, then."

I'll stop by the store and talk about this once Lutz comes to get me. While I'm there I can ask him if he knows how to use attendants properly. Maybe it's similar to how he uses his employees. As I fell into thought, the High Priest closed his ledger and handed it to Arno.

"That is all I have to talk about today. Any questions, Myne?"

"Yes! Lutz is coming at fourth bell to get me, and I would like to read books in the book room until then. Can I enter the book room? I would love to do the final part of my job and read the bible to memorize it!"

"Lutz is the boy managing your health, as I recall. From now on, have your attendants manage your health in his stead."

Despite asking to enter the book room, the topic shifted to my health management. I looked at my attendants again. Gil was scratching his head with a clear lack of enthusiasm, Delia was staring out the window absentmindedly, and Fran was looking at the High Priest over my shoulder. It was hard to imagine any of them learning to manage my health.

"My family has told me to stick with Lutz until my attendants can manage my health. I too would like that to happen as soon as possible, so Lutz doesn't have to worry about me as much. I hope my attendants work hard to make that happen. But anyway. Can I go to the book room now?"

"Fran, take her there."

"As you wish." Fran crossed his arms and nodded with a slight smile. His proud expression was entirely different from the one he wore when looking at me, and it was clear who he considered his true master to be.

But still, Fran was better than the other two. He probably wouldn't do anything problematic since he was so enraptured with the High Priest. I came to this conclusion while following him to the book room, skipping as I walked.

...It's finally tiime, for the book rooom! This is my jooob! My jooob! Delia and Gil followed me from behind as I skipped with excitement. After we were some distance away from the High Priest's room, Gil spat out some insults.

“Why d’ya even wanna go to the book room? You’re friggin’ stupid.”

Gr! If you don’t get why books are amazing, you’re the stupid one! I spun around and glared at Gil. He wrinkled his nose and got ready for a fight.

“What’s with that look? You’re not a noble, you’re nothing but a commoner. You’re just like us, but you’re being all smug with those blue robes. You’re not my master. I’m never gonna listen to you and I’m gonna make your life crap!”

Just like Gil didn’t think of me as his master, I didn’t think of him as my servant. It would be a waste of my time and energy to try and whip him into shape. So, I ignored him. “Sure, okay. Same to you.”

“...Ngh?! Whaddaya mean okay?! You makin’ fun of me?!”

As Gil shouted in anger, I turned my back to him and walked off. The moment I did, I heard the high-pitched voice of a girl speaking up.

“This whole situation is stupid.” Delia let out a “hmpf,” the smile completely gone from her face. I had thought she would hide her true personality around the other attendants since she seemed like the type to butter men up, but that was not the case. It seemed I would need to change my evaluation of her. Maybe she wasn’t the kind of girl that used her beauty to flatter and manipulate men. Or maybe she was the kind of cold-blooded hunter that only wooed the men she had her sights set on.

I gave Delia another look and she lifted up her chin arrogantly, her dark-red hair rustling in the process. It was hard to think she was only eight years old. Honestly, it kind of scared me to think what led her to being like this.

“Aaah, geez! I finally got to be an apprentice serving the High Bishop, but now I’m stuck with a little girl who my charms won’t work on. And a dense commoner girl at that. This is just the worst.”

It seemed that the High Bishop had sent Delia. That explained why she wasn’t friendly. But... what did she have to gain from announcing that she was a spy? Did the High Bishop tell her to do that?

“Okay, I’ll get someone to take your place.” Confused by her revelations, I suggested that I would have her replaced with someone else, which for some reason made her burst into anger with arched eyebrows.

“Geez! You really are stupid. Don’t switch me out for anyone. What are you even thinking?!”

Um... That’s my line. What are YOU thinking?

“The High Bishop himself asked me to bother you. If I get switched out, he’ll think I’m incompetent!”

Despite speaking the same language, we weren't understanding each other at all. I simply did not get her. Now that I knew the High Bishop had directly ordered her to bother me, there was no way I would go anywhere near her if I could help it. I would obviously try to get her replaced.

Suddenly, I realized something. Even if I got rid of Delia, the High Bishop would definitely just send another attendant to spy on me. It would probably be safer for me to stick with Delia, who didn't think twice before revealing her intentions, than risk getting a spy who was good at hiding things. As I fell into thought, Delia jabbed an accusatory finger my way.

"I'm not afraid of you just because you have blue robes! I have the High Bishop's approval and soon I'm going to be his mistress!"

Either I misheard her, or for some reason nobles these days really loved to make little girls their mistresses. I thought back to how shocked I had been to hear Freida say something similar, then thought about how old the High Bishop was and felt a little sick. I thought that the gray shrine maiden with the bookish sex appeal had been his type, but I guess not.

"...Um, should you really be proud about being a mistress?"

"Obviously. Don't you know being a mistress is the best thing we girls can hope for? Or did you seriously not know that? Well, if you're not as cute as me you can pretty much give up on it, anyway."

"Bwuh? Being a mistress is the best thing you can hope for?" That was definitely different from what I was used to. In Freida's case, at least, I understood that we were both using the word "mistress" in the same way. She hadn't seemed proud about it, and it wasn't her life goal.

I stood there, blown away by how different Delia's world view was from my own, at which point Gil shot a mocking smile at me and shrugged.

"Like, duh. If you're a blue robe's mistress, you get to have gray robe servants yourself. The High Bishop's mistresses are like on another level from us gray robes. Man, girls sure are lucky. But for real, is your head alright? This stuff's basic as heck, how do you not know this already?"

Despite him mocking me for being ignorant, I couldn't feel mad. I didn't want to know that girls in the orphanage only had one way to be successful in life. I didn't want to know that they had to become the mistresses of powerful people or waste away. Nobody I had ever met considered becoming a mistress to be the limit of their potential, but to the orphans, to those living in the temple, that was life. They wouldn't listen to me no matter what I said. We were just from different worlds.

“Gil, you’re overstepping your bounds!” Fran raised his voice as I held my head in my hands. But Gil didn’t flinch at all. He just laughed derisively at me.

“It’s her fault for being stupid. Everyone knows this stuff.”

“...Sister Myne, the High Priest instructed you on what to do in this situation. He said that you should reprimand your attendants when they behave improperly.”

“Uh huh, he sure did. Are we at the book room yet?” I really just didn’t care. I didn’t have the energy or motivation to reprimand or punish Gil and Delia.

Fran was enraptured by the High Priest and probably wasn’t too happy about being stuck as my attendant. Delia was aiming to be the High Bishop’s mistress and fully intended on making me miserable. Gil looked down on me and from the very start didn’t intend on serving me at all. It would be more productive for me to read books than to try and figure out how to get on good terms with these three.

“I will have to report this to the High Priest.”

“Go ahead. That’s your job, I imagine.”

Fran sighed, then opened a door and walked inside. My heart jumped for joy after I saw the paradise behind the door. I reached out nervously and searched for an invisible barrier while walking into the room. Unlike last time, I managed to get inside with nothing blocking my way.

“Woow!” The air clearly changed once I was completely inside. Trembling with emotion, I filled my lungs with the kind of dusty air you could only find in book storage rooms. The smell was a bit different from what I was used to, probably due to the usage of parchment and the number of wooden boards. The ink was probably made differently too. The smell of ink and old paper was so nostalgic for me that tears of happiness actually formed in my eyes.

There weren’t many bookshelves in the room. Some had tightly shut doors while others were packed with nigh-overflowing numbers of boards and scraps of paper. Shelves for managing scrolls were elsewhere, with parchment wrapped up like carpet rolls that had their names written on labels that hung off them. A bit further into the room were cylindrical containers shaped like barrels that had entire series of scrolls inside of them, with labels attached to them to identify the contents.

The light shining in from the spaced-apart windows was bright, and there was a long desk by them that looked like one you might see in a college library. The top of the desk had a slanted book reading section which had several books lined out, chained to the desk but still begging to be read.

“This is the bible.” At Fran’s guidance, I touched the leather cover

of one of the chained books. I then unfastened the belt that was keeping it closed. Immediately, the book opened a bit with the cover lifting up on its own. That was normal for moist parchment, but it seemed to me like the book was begging me to read it.

Aaaah... How long has it been since I've just opened a book and read it? I opened the cover, and the clank of chains echoed throughout the book room. My fingers trembled as I flipped through the yellowed pages. I traced my fingers over the distinctively handwritten text and began reading a book myself for the first time in a long time.

“Hey, come on. It’s noon. Time for lunch.”

Despite the fact I was dwelling in the long-missed bliss of reading, someone came to interfere. I could have ignored them if they just kept calling out to me, but I was forced back into reality by them shaking my shoulder.

“Gil, no talking in the library. If you can’t be quiet, get out. I’m reading right now.”

“Friggin’ what?! It’s lunch!” yelled Gil in stunned surprise, but I didn’t even need to compare the importance of lunch with the importance of books. With a book in hand, I could go two days without eating before getting hungry.

“Apparently I’m not your master, so what do you care? Go away and eat on your own.”

Despite giving him the freedom to eat on his own, his eyes opened wide and he tried to say something else, but I cut him off.

“Listen closely, Gil. Don’t. Get. In. My. Way.” I intentionally unleashed my mana and let it course through me before he made me snap with anger. I kind of got the knack of controlling mana during the offering earlier, and now was as good a time as any to try letting it out. Fran immediately grabbed Gil and Delia by the scruffs of their necks and dashed out of the book room with them.

Mmm. Nice and quiet. I forced the mana back into me and resumed reading. Nobody else bothered my reading until Lutz came to get me.

Not Like the Other Blue Robes

“Luuuutz!” The moment I saw Lutz’s face, I felt the relief of being back in a world I was familiar with flow through me. I raced down the stairs and jumped into Lutz’s arms, hugging him tightly as I rubbed my head against him. “I’m already so tired, Lutz.”

“Aaah, yeah, you’re looking a bit under the weather. Good work today.” Lutz patted my head and praised me for my hard work.

I mainly just read today, but my attendants were apparently required to stay near me as part of their job. There was always somebody near me, watching everything I did. It was normal for me to stop paying attention to my surroundings once I got absorbed in a book, but it was bad for my heart to notice someone watching me every time I came back to reality. The emotional baggage of being stared at was heavy enough to tire me out.

...Nobles were impressive, actually. How long would it be before I got used to this kind of thing? Maybe I had it easier than them since I could go home and sleep unattended. I would probably go crazy if I was watched constantly from “Good morning” to “Goodnight.”

“Hey, Lutz. I want to go see Mr. Benno right now if I can. Was he at the store?”

“He got back when I was leaving, so probably. Why, what happened?”

I shook my head at Lutz as he started worrying. “I need to get money from the Merchant’s Guild and bring it to the High Priest as a donation. Sooner is better, so...”

“Hmm. Alright, let’s go.” We started to walk in that direction, but for some reason my trio of attendants began to follow us. Inside the temple was one thing, but I definitely didn’t want them following me outside. I didn’t want them watching me at all times.

“...You three don’t have to come.”

“I am afraid that I must, as your attendant.”

“That’s right! Meeting someone without your attendants is just ridiculous, don’t even think about it.”

Fran and even Delia were both so opposed to me meeting Benno without them that I could guess normal blue-robed priests always brought their attendants with them to meetings. *I’ll have to make a mental note of that.*

“Hmph. Well if I don’t gotta go, I’m not gonna. I’m too hungry for

it.” Gil, who probably didn’t know much about attendants either, gave me a kinda hateful glare and spun around to leave. But the other two didn’t do the same.

I felt better without attendants around. I was going to a place I was used to visiting, and with Lutz around the attendants would be dead weight anyway. *Well... What’s the harm in driving them off, then?*

“Hey, Delia. Could you go tell the High Priest that I’ll be back with the donation once I settle things with Mr. Benno? I’ll be in big trouble if he doesn’t hear about this. I’m counting on you.”

“Oh, you’ll be in big trouble? I understand. I’ll be sure he hears about this.” Delia gave a wide, transparent grin. She would either fail to deliver the message, or give it to the High Bishop instead. Delia turned around and entered the temple with the most excited smile I had seen on her the entire day.

I let out a sigh of relief at having brushed Delia off, which made Fran grimace a bit while looking at Delia go. “Sister Myne, if you have messages for the High Priest, I can deliver them. Please go with Delia.”

“Fran, I asked Delia to do that. If I need an attendant with me, you can come with me yourself.”

Fran gave a blatantly unhappy frown and shook his head. “But there is no telling if she will actually deliver that message to the High Priest.”

“I’m with Lutz right now, so you can go deliver it to him yourself if you want. I’ll be in trouble if no one else does, definitely.” I left it at that and walked off, holding hands with Lutz.

Fran wavered for a bit at the temple entrance, but ultimately decided to prioritize delivering the message to the High Priest. He turned around and entered the temple.

“You sure that was the right thing to do, Myne? Aren’t they supposed to be learning to manage your health?” Lutz turned back and looked at the now-vacant temple entrance.

Oh yeah, they were supposed to learn to do that, I thought to myself while sighing heavily. “...Mmmm. One of those three attendants assigned to me should be learning to do that, but I don’t think it’ll happen. He just doesn’t have the motivation for it.”

“Huh?”

“He wants to serve the High Priest, but he was probably told to serve me instead. No matter what he’s doing for me, he doesn’t seem happy about it. Things might change if he starts considering me his master more than the High Priest, but that’s basically never going to happen, ever.”

“You as a master, Myne...? Yeah, can’t see it. You don’t have the kind of majesty or dignity that demands respect,” said Lutz in a

teasing tone with a laugh. I laughed with him. It was good to be back with someone I could trust.

“Hi, Mr. Mark. Is Mr. Benno here?” I saw Mark while Lutz was opening the door, so I waved at him like usual. His eyes widened and he paled the moment he saw me.

“Myne, come inside. Quickly.”

“Bwuh?” Mark, looking more unsettled than I had ever seen before, hurriedly urged me into the store. He immediately opened the door to Benno’s office and gestured us inside, without getting his permission and having us wait in the store like he usually did.

“Master, Myne has arrived at the store. I am letting her in at once.”

“What’s with you, Mark? Why’s Myne visiting got you all...” said Benno in a teasing tone as he looked up, having heard Mark close the door immediately. But the second he saw me, his eyes opened wide and his eyebrows shot up in anger.

“GRAAAH! Myne! You IDIOT!”

“Eek!” His sudden shouting surprised me so much that I fell back and covered my ears. Even Lutz gasped and jumped a little.

“Bwuh? Wha? Why are you so mad, Benno?!”

“You thoughtless idiot! Why did you come here wearing that?! Did you really walk all the way here from the temple wearing that?!”

“...I did, but what’s the problem with that?” I looked down at my outfit, tilting my head in confusion. Lutz did the same. Seeing that neither of us fundamentally understood the problem, Benno scratched his head and Mark rubbed his temples.

“Myne, you’re wearing a blue shrine maiden outfit. Normal blue shrine maidens are nobles. Nobles travel by carriage. They never just walk around the city. Do you understand why?”

Benno’s question confused me. I thought back to the few times I had ridden carriages myself. They were bumpy and uncomfortable. But since commoners rarely if ever got to ride them, they became a symbol of status and were a fast way of impressing them. Back in my Urano days, I only used a car when I knew I would be bringing a lot of stuff back, when the destination was a long way away, or when the weather was bad and walking would be annoying.

“Ummm... Because they want to show off and walking is a pain?”

“No! If nobles just walked around, they would be kidnapped and held hostage for a ransom! Never wear that outside the temple unless you want to get kidnapped!”

“Y, Y-Y-Y-, YES SIIIR!” I immediately started taking off my apprentice shrine maiden robes. I was wearing my apprentice merchant clothes beneath them, so all I had to do was undo the sash and pull the robes over my head.

...I thought the blue robes are basically like a school uniform, but to other people they're like a sign saying: "I am a noble. I have money." I never even considered that someone might kidnap me for money.

Benno watched me fold up the robes with a conflicted expression on his face, then sighed heavily with exhaustion. "Anyway, what're you doing here? I doubt you came here just to give us heart attacks."

"Right, I have a request for you. Mr. Benno, could you come with me to the Merchant's Guild, and then go to the temple?"

"What for?" Benno blinked in confusion.

"I want you to help withdraw and carry five small golds to the temple for a donation. I've been handling large money exchanges with my guild card up until now, but the High Priest doesn't have one, and I'd be scared of walking around with that much money. I asked the High Priest about this, and believe it or not, he just told me to have my attendants do it."

Benno furrowed his brows at my complaints. "What do you mean, 'believe it or not'? That's what attendants do. It's their job."

"...I don't know how anyone expects me to have the courage to trust that much money with people I barely know. People who don't even like me," I said, pursing my lips. Benno's dark-red eyes opened wide and he blinked in surprise.

"There are people out there that someone as thoughtless as you — someone who's been tricked by the guildmaster more times than I can count, someone who keeps trusting and trusting him after that — can't trust? What in the world is wrong with them?"

"Ummm, one of them is a spy sent by the High Bishop, and one of them is a spy sent by the High Priest. The last one is a troublemaker assigned to me out of spite. I can deal with them following me around the temple, but no way can I trust them with my money."

"You know, I figured as much, but wow... They really hate you over there, huh?" Benno's accurate assessment made me groan a little.

"Guuuh... When this all started I thought I wouldn't care about anything as long as I could read books for the last months of my life, but this is going to be awful if it never stops."

"Yeah, the situation's different now. Your only choice with the spies is to build up a good relationship with them, even if it's just a superficial one. Look for things you can trust them to do without putting your full faith in them. As for the troublemaker, well, train him like you would a wild animal."

Framing Gil as a wild animal made me think of a baby monkey playing tricks in a tree while screeching noisily. "But animals and people are different."

"Not as much as you'd think. If they don't listen to you, hit'm with a stick. If they listen to you, give them a reward. Beat into them who

their master is.”

Putting aside matters of trust, it seemed I would need to make them obedient either way. “...I’d rather use that time to read books.”

“Don’t be lazy! It’ll be worse if you end up in noble society without attendants you can use!”

“Ngh... I’ll try to be optimistic.”

Benno sighed and shook his head to get back on track. “We got off topic here. So, when’re you supposed to be bringing this donation?”

“I was going to decide on a date after hearing about your plans. I asked one of my attendants to tell the High Priest that I’ll bring the money when you’re ready, so—”

Hearing that made Benno jump out of his chair. “That’s the same thing as saying you’ll be bringing it immediately! Mark, get ready! We’re going to the temple!”

“Understood!” Mark, looking pale, dashed out of the room.

“U-Um, okay, let’s go to the Merchant’s Guild then.”

“That’d be a waste of time. No need for us to go. Hold out your card.” After tapping cards with me, Benno said to put my blue robes back on, then used the inner door to race up the stairs to the next floor.

I picked up the robes I had just taken off and put them back on. After tying the sash, I hung my head. I hadn’t expected any of this to happen. I just said that to get rid of my attendants, but it put both Benno and myself in a bad situation.

“...What should I do, Lutz?” Everything, down to the meaning of just a few words, changed dramatically based on where you were and who you were talking to. Words meant different things for different groups. I thought I understood something that simple, but I didn’t.

Lutz patted my head gently. “No surprise here, we don’t know anything about nobles. You couldn’t help making a mistake this time, but you gotta work to improve your flaws.”

“My flaws?” I tilted my head in confusion, and Lutz gave a big nod while looking at me with somewhat stern eyes.

“I know you love books more than anything, and you just want to keep reading books forever. But before that can happen, you need to learn to talk to the people around you and learn how to live properly. I don’t know anything about the world of merchants. Things everyone around me knows, I don’t. So I’m listening to everyone I can. Picking up all the information I can. The other apprentices, Mr. Mark, everyone’s teaching me. If you ignore people just ’cause they’re annoying to deal with, you’ll never learn how to live.”

Lutz’s words cut deep into my heart. I knew that he, as the son of a craftsman that jumped headfirst into the world of merchants, was working his absolute hardest to fit into the store. But me? Although

my motivations were different, I had jumped into the world of the temple just like Lutz, but I wasn't making any effort to get used to living there.

"I'm working hard because I want to live as a merchant. If you want to read books, you gotta learn to live in the temple. Don't worry. I know you can do it. 'Cause you're smart, Myne."

"I'm not smart. I never think before doing anything. You're way smarter than me, Lutz." No way was I smart. I was a thoughtless idiot, just like Benno said. No matter how much I learned in either life, it never helped me calm down and think ahead.

"Thoughtless or not, you always run straight toward your goal, right? If your goal is to read books and be happy, what's gonna stop you from doing just that? Work hard, Myne, so you can relax and read books."

"Ngh... You know me too well, Lutz." Just as my heart was lifting up with optimism, footsteps came echoing down the stairs. The inner door creaked open and Mark, wearing a long-sleeved outfit of a single color, walked back into the room.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Instead of his usual butler outfit, Mark was wearing a loose-looking, long-sleeved garment that strongly resembled a kimono. It was green with blue embroidery, and the garment reached all the way down to his knees. Beneath it was a tightly fitting pair of white pants, in contrast to the loose upper garment, which reminded me of how I had made my baptism outfit look fancier. The cloth was visibly high quality, and it was obvious that the outfit was for dealing with nobles.

"Finally done." Benno came into the room after Mark. He was wearing a white upper garment with sleeves even longer and larger than Mark's outfit and a hem that went down to his ankles. The embroidery was so much fancier than Mark's that they couldn't even be compared, and he was even wearing a lightweight cloak on top of it. The cloak had blue gemstones on the shoulders and was clasped with a golden brooch. He was holding something that looked like flowers. His milky-colored hair was slicked back with something like pomade, making him look like an entirely different person.

The fact that one was expected to wear an outfit this different just to talk to nobles at all made me gasp. I was once again reminded that I had jumped into an entirely different world, and it terrified me now more than ever. I never should have said something that wrapped Benno or anyone else into this.

"Mr. Benno, I'm sorry. I got you wrapped into this because I didn't think hard enough..." I said, running up to him.

Benno pointed at the flower hairpin he was carrying, saying that it was their newest one, and then slipped it into my bun next to my hair

stick. Then he gave me his usual invincible grin and said, “Don’t sweat it so much. My motto is that you find the best opportunities at the worst of times. If we hand your donation over fast and treat this like a noble would, we’ll give the Gilberta Company a good impression. Let’s go.” Benno’s confident declaration didn’t seem to be dishonest.

I didn’t know what kind of command structure existed within the store, but by the time Benno and Mark finished changing and left, they had a small box packed with small golds, a rolled up piece of cloth, a small jar, and three somethings bundled up in cloth all prepared. Outside of the store was a carriage large enough to fit four adults, with a well-dressed driver waiting for us.

...*When did all this happen?!* As I stood there surprised, Benno picked me up with far more respectful reverence than usual and politely carried me to the carriage. After being sat in the clearly expensive carriage, I looked up at Benno with a worried look on my face. He flicked my forehead.

“You’re a noble right now. I’m used to this kinda thing and I’ll take care of it, so you just sit there and smile. Don’t panic, no matter what happens. Be bold. Never lower your head or stare at the ground. Does all that sound possible?”

“...I can do it.”

I saw Lutz through the window of the carriage. He mouthed “good luck,” and I nodded hard.

Mark got inside, shut the door, and off went the carriage. My heart shook along with the bumpy carriage as it took me to my first real encounter with noble society.

Benno's Meeting With the High Priest

I straightened up when the carriage stopped at the temple gate and the driver stepped off the front. I could just barely hear him speaking to the guards by the gate. I stood up to get out, but Benno silently held me down. Surprised, I looked up and saw him slowly shaking his head side to side. Understanding that as a signal to “sit still and stay quiet,” I scooted back in my seat to sit more upright and got an approving nod.

I shook in fear, not knowing what was happening or what was about to happen. I looked around the carriage with my fists clenched and saw that Mark was using this opportunity to write something. He must have noticed me watching him, as he looked up and gave me a reassuring smile. Aware that my face was stiff with anxiety, I smiled back. Mark barely stopped himself from bursting into laughter.

I wasn't sure if it was okay to break the silence, so I puffed out my cheeks to show I was angry. Benno poked my left cheek. Honestly, it was starting to feel silly being the only one nervous here.

After a brief wait the carriage shook gently, a sign that the driver had gotten back on. Mark quickly put away his ink and pen, then handed the piece of paper he had been writing on to Benno. Benno looked over it and grinned. When I tried peeking at the paper to see what was on it, the carriage started moving again. Benno spoke once the carriage began making noise.

“At the gate, the driver identifies his passengers, requests an intermediary, and has them open the gate for the carriage. We'll be leaving the carriage in the following order: Mark, me, you. Take my hand and slowly climb down the steps. Under no circumstances should you jump off or skip any steps.”

It seemed he remembered the time that Lutz and I both jumped off the carriage with a cheer, back when we had ridden one together. I glanced away awkwardly, having already predicted that I would miss a step out of nervousness.

“The intermediary should have already contacted the relevant people, which means your attendants should be waiting at the gate. We'll head to the High Priest's office with you, me, and his spy in front. Mark and your other attendants will follow us from behind.”

My intention had just been to hand over the donation to the High

Priest and leave it at that, but it seemed in reality this was quite the significant occasion. I could hardly imagine what an enormous social gaffe it would have been to treat the donation so lightly.

"I'll carry the box with the donation for you, so once we've checked its contents in the High Priest's room, shower me with your gratitude."

"Bwuh? What do you mean? Like, just say 'thanks' or 'I owe you one'?"

"Nobles wouldn't say it like that, but eh, that'll do."

Mmm... I guess a more noble-esque phrase would be "You have my gratitude"? I don't know, that sounds really arrogant.

I fell into thought, digging through my memories for lines from medieval chivalry stories and poem collections, but they were all fiction. Having some memorized lines wouldn't help me when the person I thanked replied to me without following a script. I considered using some business lines I saw in a book about corporate language, but that was more for merchants than for nobles, probably.

"What about... 'I thank you for your noble assistance from the bottom of my heart'?"

"Where did you learn that line?!" Benno looked at me with surprise. I had just said something I imagined a princess saying to someone, but his reply was ambiguous enough that I didn't know whether he approved or disapproved.

"No good...?"

"...Nah, it's perfect. Keep talking like that until we're back in the carriage." I nearly let out a childish "Bwuh," but swallowed it down and took deep breaths while fixing my posture.

"Understood."

The carriage soon passed through the large gate and stopped after entering the temple grounds. The driver opened the carriage door, and Mark left first. Next was Benno. Which left me as the last one standing in the doorway.

Before me was an entrance to the temple that I didn't recognize at all. It seemed to be an entry solely for nobles and the rich, judging by the elaborate garden of colorful flowerbeds growing in the area dotted with sculptures. The door was carved with ornate designs just like the chapel's back wall.

The front entrance I had been using up until this point was much smaller in comparison and apparently was for commoners who came to the temple by foot. It felt like a shameful back entrance now that I had seen this fancy door. Even the doors used to enter the temple clearly delineated those of different statuses, establishing a black and white world that was hard to ignore. This entrance forced me to recognize that there existed a clear class division in this world, one

with depths I had barely begun to scratch. I felt my heart clench.

“Myne, your hand...” said Benno, so I held out a hand while coming back to my senses. But the second I looked down at my feet to avoid falling, I felt him tug at my hand and pick me up.

He whispered “Don’t look down” while smiling, and I nodded back with a smile of my own while a cold sweat of pure fear ran down my back. I understood that to mean “Don’t lower your eyes even if you’re not confident,” so in other words, the act of looking down itself was banned in all circumstances.

Benno lowered me down, more gently than I had maybe ever seen him do anything, and then I saw Fran walking quickly toward us.

“Sister Myne.”

“Benno, this is my attendant, Fran. Fran, has the High Priest graciously permitted us to see him now?” I said in such a regal tone that Fran opened his eyes wide in surprise before collecting himself and crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“The preparations have been made.”

“Sister Myne, who shall you have carry the master’s gifts?” I looked around, but Gil and Delia weren’t present. I wasn’t sure if I should be relieved that they weren’t here to cause trouble, or worried since there was nobody to carry the gifts. I decided not to worry about it and just leave everything to Fran.

“Fran, might I ask you to summon someone you trust to carry the gifts?” Despite me unfairly leaving all the work to him, Fran nodded and immediately got to work. He didn’t look frustrated and he didn’t protest. Indeed, he was the very model of a skilled attendant that executed the orders of his master. It honestly baffled me.

What made his attitude change? The only thing different between me now and me from this morning is how I’m talking, I thought, which made me suddenly realize what was going on.

There was no doubt that talking like a noble was very important to Fran. He only had eyes for the High Priest. His attitude had annoyed me, but at the same time, the utter lack of nobility in my behavior had no doubt annoyed him in the same way. I wasn’t working hard enough as his master to deserve his servitude. Lutz was right. I would need to work hard and learn to act like a noble if I wanted to survive here.

Fran summoned several gray priests who split the gifts between them. After checking to make sure everything was accounted for, he said “Please follow me” and began walking. Unlike this morning, where he had been exuding an aura of displeasure, he was thriving like a fish being put back into the water.

Benno encouraged me forward with a look, and so I started following after Fran. Somehow, everyone had ended up in the exact

places that Benno had said back in the carriage. But it was surprisingly difficult for me to keep up with Fran's adult strides. I desperately worked my legs to keep up and Benno, seeing me falling behind, felt compelled to speak up.

"You're walking a bit too fast, aren't you?"

Fran turned around and blinked, as if he didn't understand what he had just been told.

"I fully understand that you've just become her attendant, but if you don't pay more attention to your walking speed, Sister Myne's going to collapse. Look at her, she's already out of breath. Might not be my place to say this, but could you pay a little more attention to her?"

"...I have no excuse."

I had shamed Fran by putting him in a situation where Benno, a visitor, would feel compelled to complain. His complaint had been something that I should have said myself, as his master. I nearly apologized on the spot, but only a failure of a noble would apologize to their attendant here, as much as it pained me to admit.

"Benno, I thank you for your concern. I believe that Fran will soon learn to match my pace, given that he is a skilled priest who has the full trust of the High Priest. There is no need for you to worry about me."

"In that case, shall we have Mark carry you the rest of the way? We would all be very troubled if you suddenly fell unconscious as you are like to do." It was written on Benno's face that he would be ticked off if I collapsed in the hallway. Mark gave the bundle he was carrying to Fran, then lifted me up after a polite warning.

...*Gyaaah?! A bridal carry?* He picked me up in an entirely different way from usual, which surprised me so much I had to swallow a yell. *Be regal, be regal*, I repeated to myself while forcing a regal smile on my face.

"Fran, please continue."

"As you wish."

Once the High Priest's room came into view, Mark let me down, took the bundle back from Fran, and returned to the other gift carriers. Despite our destination being so close, Fran repeatedly turned around to check how fast I was going and matched his pace to mine. I nodded with a smile signifying that his pace was fine, which made his expression wash over with clear relief.

Unlike the High Bishop's room, there were no priests standing in front of the High Priest's room. Fran took out a small bell from his sash and, standing in front of the door, rung it. Normally I would need to call out and wait for a gray priest on the other side to open the door for me, but the bell made all that unnecessary.

I stepped forward to enter the opening door and was held back by Benno. I glanced around and saw that everyone else was waiting. It seemed I needed to stay still until the door was fully open. I put my feet back to where they were and waited for the door to open, pretending I had never tried moving at all.

There were two gray priests lined up behind the door, with Arno standing in front of the High Priest's desk. We walked inside, and Fran stopped in front of the table meant for guests. I stopped as well, then Benno and Mark stopped. The platoon of gift-bearers lined up against the wall.

Benno took a smooth step forward, got on one knee like I had when performing the fealty ceremony, and bowed his head a little.

"May this meeting, ordained by the divine guidance of the gods, be blessed by the God of Fire Leidenschaft on this vibrant summer day. It is nice to meet you, High Priest. I am Benno of the Gilberta Company, visiting here at Sister Myne's introduction. May the bonds formed here be strong and lasting."

Benno casually dropped the name of a god, but I hadn't memorized their names yet. It seemed I wouldn't be able to properly greet nobles without memorizing the names of each season's patron god. I paled at the thought of having to do what Benno just did. Now I understood why the High Priest said memorizing the bible would be part of my job. It seemed that learning noble culture would be pretty difficult.

"I bless this day from the bottom of my heart. May the God of Fire Leidenschaft's guidance take the Gilberta Company to ever greater riches," said the High Priest while pressing his left hand above his heart, angling his right hand down and extending his fingers just slightly above Benno's hand. A faint blue light blossomed out of the High Priest's palm and dyed Benno's milky hair with blue. The light disappeared quickly, but anyone could tell that Benno had received a divine blessing.

I gasped, having not expected to see such a holy and impressive display of divine power. That blue light was probably mana. My own mana was nothing but a Crushing threat when I got emotional, but if I learned how to manage it properly, maybe I could bless others just like that. Or rather, I would need to learn to bless others like that, as a shrine maiden.

The list of things I needed to do was growing constantly in my head. Lutz's advice that I had things I needed to do before reading books was so true it hurt.

"Sister Myne. Please, come this way." Fran's words snapped me back into attention and I realized the High Priest was already sitting at the guest table. Considering the status of everyone here, there was

no doubt that nobody else could move until I did. I stood in front of a chair with Fran's guidance, and that was when the problem arose. I was as tall as a short five-year-old at best. When sitting in adult chairs, I generally needed to climb up them. That wasn't a problem normally, but naturally it wasn't an option here if I wanted to keep looking regal.

...Who could have seen this coming?! There's no way to regally sit in a chair that's too tall! What would a noble child do in a situation like this?! Will a generic "Dear me, I seem to be in trouble" pose be understood in this world?! I didn't know if it would, but having no other options, I put my right hand on my cheek, hugged my bent right elbow with my left arm, and looked up at Fran with my head slightly tilted. I then waited for three seconds.

"...Excuse me, Sister Myne." Fran stuck his hands under my arms and lifted me onto the chair.

Ooooh! He understood! I smiled at Fran as he adjusted the seat, and he gave a somewhat forced smile in return. By the time I returned my gaze to the table, Benno was already sitting next to me, Arno was standing behind the High Priest, and Mark was standing behind Benno. There was no doubt that Fran was standing behind me. The priests with the gifts were still lined up against the wall.

"Now then, Sister Myne. This is indeed the money you have entrusted me with, yes?" Benno opened the carved chest-shaped box he had been holding and showed its contents to me. Within were five small golds. It was the first time I had ever seen small golds in person. I spent a few seconds enraptured by their shininess, then said the line I had practiced earlier.

"I thank you for your noble assistance from the bottom of my heart."

"Your gratitude is truly appreciated." Benno placed the still-open box on the table close to the High Priest. "High Priest, this is Sister Myne's donation money. Please accept it."

"...Indeed I shall. Myne, and Benno. I thank you." The High Priest briefly checked the contents of the box, then closed it and handed it to Arno, who took it off somewhere. Probably a secure storage room.

"In addition, I have brought gifts of thanks and greetings," said Benno, leading the platoon of gray priests at the wall to step forward and line up by the side of the table. Mark lined up each gift one after another on the table. The High Priest raised an eyebrow as he looked at them.

"I understand the greetings, but why the thanks? I don't recall having done anything that would earn your gratitude."

"I am thoroughly grateful that due to your efforts, the Myne Workshop will be allowed to continue operating." Benno crossed his

arms in front of his chest and bowed his head slightly. The High Priest nodded with an “I see.” With that done, Benno began explaining the gifts to the High Priest.

“This is the highest quality cloth that is regularly used within my store. This is a product known as rinsham. Although my company currently has full rights to it, rinsham was originally invented and created by the Myne Workshop. Last but not least, this is the plant paper that has recently entered the market, also invented by the Myne Workshop.”

The High Priest seemed to be most interested in the plant paper. He picked it up and touched it to see how it felt.

“I give these gifts in thanks to you, High Priest, to the High Bishop, who is unfortunately absent, and finally, to Sister Myne, who enabled this meeting to occur.”

Wait, me?! I opened my eyes wide in surprise, but managed to keep quiet. Benno and the High Priest continued their discussion without noticing my surprise.

“I see. These are quite the splendid products. Thank you. Priests, line the gifts on that shelf.”

“I am overjoyed that the gifts are to your liking.”

The gray priests began to move. Mark handed the gifts to them, wrapped the paper back in the cloth, and so on.

...Haaah, it's finally over. With the donation and gifts given, my work was over for the day. I let out a sigh of relief and Benno immediately smacked me beneath the table. I looked at him with my head tilted in confusion. In response, he gestured down with his eyes while deftly managing to maintain his manufactured smile despite his visible exasperation. I looked down as well, keeping my head held up, and saw that Benno had a small piece of paper between his fingers.

Feeling nostalgic for all the notes I had passed around in school, I reached out and took the paper. I had passed notes with girls, but never boys. Benno was a bit too old to be called a “boy,” but still, it was my first time passing notes with the opposite sex. With my heart beating a little fast despite it being from Benno, I opened the note. Inside contained the words: *Don't let your guard down, idiot.*

...Give back my excitement! The High Priest looked toward me, as if sensing that my regal act was slipping. I hurriedly put a smile back on my face, but he hadn't missed it. His eyes narrowed slightly.

I gasped a little and readjusted my posture as the High Priest waved a hand. In response, the gray priests crossed their arms over their chests, lowered their waists to make a gesture of respect to the High Priest, then left the room one after another.

“There are several things I would like to take this opportunity to ask, Benno.” The High Priest now wore a rigid expression and looked

at Benno with sharp eyes that would let no lies or deception past. Benno seemed to be a lot tenser than before as well. It was clear that the true meeting had only just now begun. I straightened my back and squeezed the *Don't let your guard down, idiot* note in my hand.

The Meeting Begins

As the gray priests left the room, Arno pushed a cart-like thing toward the table. He then began pouring tea — presumably the High Priest's preferred kind — into a thick glass. Once it started to brew, Arno looked up and began taking out various tea-filled glass bottles while explaining what they were and what region they came from.

“Sister Myne, what would you like to drink?”

...To be honest, I had no idea. I just pointed at one at random, saying “This one please,” which prompted questions on which kind of milk I would like to use. Again, I had no idea. But my status was such that if I didn't answer, the conversation wouldn't move forward. I couldn't just say “I'll have what Benno's having.”

Even just drinking tea is an ordeal for nobles, I thought while turning to look at Fran. It was time again for me to unleash the technique I had learned today: throwing problems onto someone else.

“Fran, what kind of milk do you think will suit this tea the best?”

“Hm... Milk from a three-year old *grauvache* from Holger will have a light sweetness that should suit your tastes well.”

“I see. In that case, I would like *grauvache* milk from Holger.” My drink for the meeting was teegabt with Holger *grauvache*. Honestly, it was hard to believe we were still speaking the same language.

As Arno asked Benno for his preferences, all the other gray priests finished leaving the room. Then, — “Your tea, Sister Myne” — he silently and gracefully placed a glass tea cup in front of me, which I picked up and took a sip from. The blended tea had mellow milk in it and spread a gentle sweetness through my mouth. Both the ingredients and the preparation were top of the line. It was so good I could feel my heart flutter.

Once everyone had their tea, Arno pushed the cart away somewhere. Just as I lost sight of him, he returned and shut the door. I couldn't help but blink in awe at how purposeful every move he made was. The moment he returned to standing behind his master, the High Priest spoke.

“Benno, I have received reports that you are the perceptive man who first took Myne under his wing. What kind of person does Myne appear to be to your keen eyes? In the temple, she is known as a dangerous individual whose mana will rampage at the drop of a hat. I would like to know what you think of her, as someone who has spent

such a long time watching over her.”

“Rampaging mana, huh...? Very interesting.” Benno glanced at me with a frighteningly hostile look in his eyes. If not for the High Priest being here, he no doubt would have yelled at me for not telling him about that. I casually looked away from him and brought my cup to my lips. “I am but a mere merchant. Mana is therefore beyond me, but I can discuss my personal experience with Myne.”

“Yes, please do.” The High Priest leaned slightly forward, urging Benno on. I felt kind of awkward, like a kid watching their parent talk about them to a teacher at a conference. Despite maintaining a demure expression, I was basically screaming *Please stop! At least do this when I’m not around!* on the inside, barely holding back the urge to run out of the room.

“Sister Myne is a prodigy, exclusively when it comes to inventing new products. She can come up with the concepts, but not create them herself. At the moment, an apprentice in my store assists her in the creation process of the products. Myne is not entirely self-aware of her genius and has consistently shown herself to be the owner of a generous, naive personality.”

It seemed that Benno’s description of me changed from “thoughtless idiot with no sense of self-preservation” to “generous and naive” when reworded for a noble’s sensibilities. I had honestly never expected Benno to say something like that. Phrasing was everything, it seemed.

“Wait just a moment. Naive I can understand, but generous?” The High Priest looked at Benno with an incredibly dubious expression, likely finding his assessment hard to believe. I couldn’t blame him. I was famous among the priests for letting my mana go on a rampage and knocking the High Bishop unconscious. The High Priest should also know from Fran’s report that I briefly let my mana loose just because Gil was getting in the way of my reading. From his perspective, I was far from a generous person. I was a dangerous, emotional person who got mad constantly.

“There are some things which she values beyond words: Her family, her friends, and indeed, books. If these are not involved, Sister Myne is generous to a fault. She trusts others almost immediately and continues to do so despite being deceived multiple times. Perhaps ‘apathetic’ or ‘indifferent’ would describe her better, to use the words of the aforementioned apprentice, who knows her even better than I do.”

“Apathetic. I see,” murmured Fran from behind me. I thought back to how I had acted this morning and realized I had no room for argument there.

The High Priest frowned in thought, looked at me, then frowned

again. "Anything else? Please state anything that might cause your mana to go berserk, outside of your family, friends, and books."

"I can't think of anything important to me other than those three things," I answered, and the High Priest nodded in reply, seeming relieved.

Benno looked up slightly in thought, then looked between Fran and the High Priest. "Speaking of which. I believe it is necessary that I report to you just how abnormally weak Myne is."

"How weak she is? Yes, I recall that she needs someone to manage her health." The High Priest looked this way and I felt Fran waver a bit behind me. He was probably remembering what Benno had said to him in the hallway.

"Myne is shockingly lacking in strength and endurance. If you do not carefully observe her expression, tone, walking speed, and how much she has moved in a given day, she will fall unconscious and collapse without warning despite appearing otherwise healthy. She will then be bedridden for several days with a fever. As of the current moment, only the apprentice in my store can manage her health."

"That apprentice is the boy named Lutz, yes? Fran. Can you manage her health?" said the High Priest, leading to everyone's eyes falling on Fran. His deep brown eyes wavered briefly, then he lowered his eyes and spoke in a tone dripping with regret.

"No, not yet... Forgive me." I turned my head a little and saw Fran's fist, which was at eye level with me, trembling a little. It was clear as day that he felt enormous frustration at himself for failing to meet the High Priest's expectations.

"Fran just became my attendant this morning. It would be unreasonable for him to learn to manage my health so soon. It took Lutz a very long time to memorize the signs himself."

"We do not have that time." Despite my attempt to back Fran up, everything fell apart with the High Priest's harsh words. "The Knight's Order might call upon us for assistance again in the fall. Learn to manage Myne's health before then. Understood, Fran?" The High Priest gave Fran a firm look, who sucked in air and then nodded.

"...Understood. I will not fail." Just as his efforts by the entrance and his knowledge of tea showed, Fran was an individual who would work immensely hard for the sake of the High Priest. I could imagine that with the High Priest directly ordering him to learn to manage my health, he would be taking it very seriously from now on. Personally, I was glad for him to have a source of positive motivation.

Benno, seeing my relief, lowered his eyes with worry. "High Priest, Myne is an extremely intelligent child considering her age. But she has little life experience, and is far removed from both the culture of the temple and noble society itself."

“Yes, I know. That is why I have assigned Fran to her. He is one of the best attendants I have. She may ask him any question that comes to mind. Of course, I intend to help educate Myne as well.”

I heard Fran gasp behind me. I turned around and saw that he was looking at the High Priest with eyes wide in disbelief. ...*Wait. Did Fran think he was assigned to be my attendant due to not working hard enough or something? If that's the case, maybe it'll be easy to get him on my side just by saying "Let's work together to help out the High Priest."* As I sipped my tea and thought of a plan to get Fran on my side, the High Priest looked between Benno and me with narrowed eyes.

“By the way, Benno. I hear some say that Myne is the Goddess of Water to you. What is the meaning behind that?”

“What?!” yelled Benno, so shocked that he dropped his cup with a clatter. Benno's blatant shock seemed to have deepened the High Priest's suspicion. He sighed and crossed his legs.

“I would like to know exactly what eyes you are looking at Myne with.”

“I understand your curiosity, but... I myself do not understand why those around me say that.” Benno faltering and making excuses was so unlike him that I wanted to laugh, but to tell the truth, I didn't know what the High Priest had meant with that Goddess of Water stuff. I tilted my head in confusion, remembering how mad Benno had gotten when Otto said the same thing.

“Um, excuse me for interrupting, but what implication does the Goddess of Water have?” I looked around, but everyone avoided making eye contact with me. It was clear nobody wanted to be the one to tell me. That was pretty awkward. I blinked in confusion and Benno passed me a note that said *Be quiet*. Apparently I had asked a question best asked quietly, so I whispered it to Fran.

“...It's important for me to know about the gods, isn't it? I would like for you to explain this to me, Fran.”

“Ah, well, that is...” Fran looked at the High Priest for help. Benno, hand on his forehead, let out a sigh and the High Priest reluctantly spoke.

“Paramour, lover, one who moves the heart. The Goddess of Water is often used as a metaphor for these things.”

Um, lover? Paramour? No way, no way. Benno's dedicated to his dead fiancée and is going to live his life as a bachelor. And even if he wasn't, why would anyone think that about Benno and me? It just doesn't make sense.

“That's ridiculous. Benno is old enough to be my father, you know.” I held back the urge to laugh and flatly made it clear that there was nothing between Benno and me.

“It is as Sister Myne says. The very idea is ridiculous.”

“So you say, but it is not uncommon for relationships to form between those with similar age gaps,” said the High Priest, looking at Benno in such a way that made it clear that he was still doubtful.

I had heard of such relationships in the entertainment industry back in Japan, but I hadn’t heard of anything like that since becoming Myne. After all, if you were remarrying with someone young enough to be your kid, you were probably old enough for your own kids to be supporting you, and the kids making money wouldn’t want more dependents in the family. Marrying someone that young first, rather than remarrying, wasn’t an option at all. The life of a commoner wasn’t easy enough for only the older member of the couple to be out there working and making money.

“I have never heard of such a thing... Oh, speaking of which, I suppose relationships with large age gaps are not rare in the temple? One of my attendants wishes to form a relationship with the High Bishop, after all. But I’m afraid the same cannot be said for commoners. It is out of the question. It’s understandable that you do not understand what life is like for us commoners, High Priest, given how sheltered this temple is.”

I was backing Benno up, but for some reason, an awkward silence followed. Benno passed another note, this one saying *Please. Shut up.* It seemed my backup wasn’t appreciated.

I zipped my lips as requested, but now nobody was talking. A lengthy, heavy silence filled the room. Everyone was sipping their tea and observing each other, rather than saying anything. Awkward. Being here felt so, so awkward.

“...High Priest, although I am but a humble servant, I would like to request permission to speak, if I may.” The savior who broke the awkward silence was none other than Mark.

I looked up in surprise, and it was written on the High Priest’s face that he wanted someone, anyone to fix this. Thus he immediately granted permission, practically applauding as he did so. “You may speak.”

“I will make this clear for the sake of my master’s honor, but in this case the Goddess of Water is being used to mean something else entirely. As you surely know, Sister Myne’s series of inventions has led my master to starting an entirely new business. The Gilberta Company dealt with only clothes and such for its entire history, but now thanks to Myne, we are blossoming into something greater than ever before. She is, indeed, the Goddess of Water to our store.”

“Hm, I see. I can understand and agree with that interpretation. In which case, as my final question, I would like to ask about the Myne Workshop.” It looked clear that he didn’t actually agree with that interpretation, but the High Priest changed the subject without

pursuing the matter further. “Just how much profit is the workshop earning? I permitted its continued operation under the condition that a portion of that profit is given to the temple, if you recall.”

Benno nodded and pretended to think, while in reality within his large sleeve he was ripping a chunk off a piece of paper that had a bunch of messages already written on it. Suddenly, it hit me that the scraps of paper Benno had been handing me all came from the piece of paper that Mark had been writing on in the carriage. I flinched.

...Wha, Mark?! It was Mark who wrote “idiot” on that note?! No way! I believed in him being a wonderful gentleman! I can’t believe that every note he wrote ahead of time is so harsh! I knew that he had written “idiot,” “shut up,” and so on in Benno’s place, but it was still shocking to me. I wished he wouldn’t have written those notes with his usual smile.

Benno handed me another note while I sunk down, depressed. It had *Don’t say anything* written on it.

“...The profit depends on the product. As you are aware, no business maintains a steady level of profit across the board. And as we are in the process of starting a new business, we are actually losing more money on investments than we are earning in revenue. Considering the costs of maintaining the workshop and preparing for this new business, I believe one tenth of the net profit is a fair sum,” Benno suggested, which made the High Priest grimace.

“One tenth is fairly low, is it not?”

“...If you will forgive my rudeness, it is so large as to be nigh unreasonable. I cannot pay the workers less, nor can I afford to lose money that could be spent purchasing the necessary materials and paying for their import costs.”

“However...”

“I understand that in business, one must at times shave off profit in order to sell more. But if the Myne Workshop goes into the red, I cannot expect for you to provide financial support, correct?”

The High Priest fell silent. Naturally, he wouldn’t be able to provide any such support. The temple was already in the red itself. And on top of that, it was difficult for the High Priest to argue from his position. The temple received free labor from orphans in the form of gray priests, and operated with donations given by the families of blue robes and the Archduke. The temple’s source of income and whatnot was entirely different from that of a store doing business. It was likely that the High Priest did not have a strong grasp on the organization of a store, nor how workers were paid.

“Sister Myne is free to donate her personal share of the profits to the temple as she wishes, but the workshop as a whole cannot afford to donate so much money that it is forced to cease operating.”

“...I see. Ten percent, then.”

Benno took the lead of the conversation with solid argument after solid argument, and in the end secured the donation amount he wanted. Benno himself was casually taking thirty percent of our profits in the form of handling fees, but he minimized donations to the temple to only ten percent.

As I sat there in awe at Benno's skill, Mark took out sheets of contract paper and lined them up along the table. Once the deal was made, one must immediately solidify it in the form of a contract. Mark's action seemed plain in comparison to Benno's deft negotiation, but he was still completely on top of things. To be honest, it felt like Mark was just as good of an attendant as those the noble blue robes had.

As this was a contract between commoners and the concentrated of mass of nobles that was the temple, the pieces of contract paper were indeed magic. We wrote the contract stating that the temple would receive one tenth of the Myne Workshop's profits, then we signed them in turn. First the High Priest, as representative of the temple; then me, as the forewoman of the Myne Workshop; then finally Benno, as my guardian and the one who would be managing the financial affairs in the first place.

...Blood, again?! I... I hate magic contracts.

“What are you waiting for, Myne? It is your turn.”

Although it was just a knife pricking the tip of a finger, I still hadn't gotten used to a blade being pointed my way. I grabbed the knife with a trembling hand at the High Priest's urging. But before I could do anything, Fran reached out from the side and took it from me.

“Please close your eyes, Sister Myne.” I squeezed my eyes shut tight and felt a jolt of pain from a finger. I opened my eyes and saw blood puckering out. Fran held out a sheet of contract paper, which I pressed my finger against. It disappeared in bright flames just like magic contracts always did.

“Those are all the questions I had. This meeting was a very productive use of time. You have my thanks, Benno.”

“Your gratitude is much appreciated, my lord.”

As Benno and the High Priest exchanged goodbyes, Mark cleaned up the tools used to write the magic contract, Fran collected the teacups, and Arno prepared the carpet.

“Now, let us pray to and thank the gods for guiding us toward this meeting,” said the High Priest while gesturing me and Benno toward the carpet. I looked up at Benno and Mark on the way there and barely held back the urge to laugh.

...Does this mean I'm going to see Benno and Mark making that goofy

praying pose?! I can't wait! I wanna see that so much! But I'm gonna lose my sides again! As I put a hand over my mouth to stifle the immense destructive power carried by the mental image of Benno and Mark striking the praying pose, I suddenly felt all the strength drain from my body. I accidentally let out a very non-regal "bwuh?!" as my knees collapsed and my body fell forward, carried by the weight of my head.

"Sister Myne?!" Fran let out a cry of surprise from behind me and everyone looked around. The High Priest gave an exasperated sigh at the sight of me collapsed.

"Myne, stand back up already. You look disgraceful." Of course, I had already tried standing back up on my own, but my hands just weren't moving. I couldn't lift my head either.

"Um, my body's being weird. I can't move at all. It doesn't feel like I have a fever, though. My hands are actually kinda cold. Mr. Benno, what's happening?"

"Like I know! Don't ask me!" Benno picked me up as he yelled, but I couldn't grab onto his shirt for support like I usually did. My arms felt so heavy it was like they didn't even belong to me.

"Honorable High Priest, I sincerely apologize for this trouble. I would like to request that formal goodbyes be omitted so that we may depart immediately."

"C-Certainly, I do not mind. I will leave Myne in your care."

Benno, still carrying me, asked the High Priest to leave with a pale expression. As he did so, I didn't feel the signs of heat swelling inside of me like I usually would. I still felt relatively cool, and honestly, it felt like my body was getting increasingly cold despite it still being the start of summer.

Mark hurriedly prepared to leave and Arno opened the door for Benno as he hastily walked out of the room with long strides. Unlike what normally happened when I collapsed, I didn't fall unconscious, and my hanging limbs felt weird. As I felt the heavy weight of my limp head, a wave of regret washed over me. I had missed Benno and Mark striking the praying pose.

"Master Benno, please wait!" From my hanging head I could see Fran's chest and part of his jaw. But Benno ignored him and kept striding away at a rapid pace. He was going so fast that my head was bouncing, and it kind of felt like my brain was being stirred up. *I would like it if he walked a bit slower so I wouldn't bounce*, I thought while hearing Fran call out to Benno from a step behind him again.



“Master Benno!”

“What? Try to pay attention, I’m in a hurry.” Benno had reverted back to his usual, completely impolite self.

Fran flinched in fear for a moment at his blunt attitude, but after sucking in air, worked up the courage to speak. “Please allow me to carry Sister Myne.”

“I’m in a hurry. No.”

“I cannot force a guest to carry her. I am Sister Myne’s attendant.” My heart fluttered at Fran continuing to challenge Benno despite his blunt rebuffs, and finally his efforts were rewarded. Benno stopped in place.

“Limp people are heavy, small or not. Absolutely do not drop her.” Benno slowly bent his knees and handed me over to Fran, who carefully adjusted his arms beneath my head and body before standing up. With my head resting against Fran’s shoulder, it didn’t have to bounce around anymore.

“You’re good at carrying people, Fran,” I said, impressed.

“Sister Myne, there is no need for you to force yourself to talk,” Fran replied with a somewhat sharp voice.

“I can’t move my body, but my head feels fine. I’m not forcing myself.”

“...I said that because you are no longer paying attention to your manner of speech.” I couldn’t help but smile at the worry in Fran’s voice. It was a bit embarrassing to know that Fran was worried about me now, but it also made me a bit happy.

“Um, Fran. With Delia and Gil around, I don’t know when we’ll have another opportunity to talk in private, so I want to say something now. Is that okay?” I whispered into Fran’s ears to avoid any other priests in the hallway from hearing, and he nodded while continuing to look straight forward.

“What would you like to say?”

“I still don’t know much of anything about being a noble, and I think that will probably cause you a lot of problems, but I’ll work hard to learn what I need to know as soon as possible, so please help me out. I’ll do my best to be useful to the High Priest, which makes our goal the same. Do you think we can be a team?” Fran’s arms squeezed me and I saw his throat bob as he sucked in air.

“That is my job in the first place. In truth... I should be the one apologizing, for not guessing the High Priest’s intentions, and burdening you with my dissatisfaction.”

“Wait, guessing? Did he not even explain anything to you?” That was a shocking revelation. It was hard to blame Fran for being unhappy over being assigned to me with no explanation. He went

from being the High Priest's attendant to the attendant of an apprentice blue shrine maiden, and a commoner one at that. Not even a noble. No doubt he could have only seen that as a demotion.

"The High Priest rarely speaks unnecessarily, as he has no way of knowing just how many spies are lurking around him. I was surprised at how much he spoke today, regardless of having sent the others out first."

"Still, I mean, you gotta let your subordinates know what your intentions are. You were hurt by being assigned to me exactly because he didn't make himself clear, right?" I had no idea what position the High Priest was in exactly, but if he was making someone as loyal as Fran unhappy, it was hard to imagine that he wasn't on a streak of losing allies.

"It felt as if the High Priest had said he did not need me, and that I was on the level of Delia and Gil."

"You're definitely not. The High Priest assigned you to me, but he definitely still considers you his servant," I whispered quietly so that nobody else would hear my extremely manipulative advice, intended to both strengthen Fran's loyalty to the High Priest and make him be more nice to me.

"Do you truly think so?" Despite asking a question, Fran's tone of voice made his firm doubt clear.

"From his perspective, he's just lending you to me. That's why he gave you orders in the meeting without asking me first, even though I'm your new master and there was a guest there. I mean, if you pretend I'm a normal noble for a second, wouldn't it be pretty rude of him to order you to learn to manage my health by autumn like that?"

"...You are not wrong." Fran let out a small laugh just as the door outside opened.

Our carriage had just returned. The driver, who had likely planned to return before the meeting ended, blinked in surprise at our early arrival.

"Fran, hand over Myne." Benno got into the carriage first and stretched out his arms. Fran hesitated for a moment, then passed me to Benno.

"May I come with you?" he said in an almost desperate tone of voice.

"No. Nothing but trouble will come from you leaving the temple with clothes like that," Benno shot him down while taking me.

Fran frowned, having not expected to be declined over his outfit, and looked down at his clothes. "I can get you some clothes you can use in the future, if you don't mind secondhand stuff. But give up this time."

"That would be much appreciated." After thanking Benno, Fran

crossed his arms in front of the carriage and knelt. “Sister Myne, I await and pray for your safe return.”

It was a reasonable farewell for an attendant saying goodbye to their departing master, but it caught me off guard and I kinda floundered. I wasn’t sure how to reply. I considered Fran’s master to be the High Priest, and I wouldn’t be a good master myself. I wasn’t the kind of person he should be waiting on.

As I froze in silence, unable to think of something to say, Benno whispered into my ear quietly. “Just tell him you’ll be back. Say something like, I entrust my home to you in my absence.”

So Benno said, but the temple wasn’t my home. I didn’t even have a room there; it was anything but a home to me. But although it would have been simple to argue with Benno about that, Fran said he would wait for me. I felt that, as Fran’s master, it was my duty to return to the temple.

I sucked in air and then replied with as much elegance I could muster: “Fran, I entrust my home to you in my absence.”

Benno rested me on the seat of the carriage with my head on his lap. I felt my chilling body warm up a bit after he undid his gold brooch and covered me with his cloak. I let out a sigh of relief, then realized what situation I was in and barely held back a scream.

...Oh no! This is a lap pillow! Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that Benno would not only be the first guy I shared secret notes with, but the first guy (outside of my family) to give me a lap pillow. Maybe this technically didn’t count since Benno had given up on love. I hoped it didn’t count. But either way, since I couldn’t escape this situation on my own, I had to endure the embarrassment until we arrived at the store. I attempted to escape from my feelings of anxiety by asking Benno a question, although that kinda made me talk too fast.

“M-Mr. Benno, do priests not have outside clothes?”

“Nope, ’cause they don’t need any. Some might have a pair or two, but most won’t.” According to Benno, priests only ever left the temple and entered the lower city when rituals or ceremonies required it. They didn’t stand out as much as blue priests, but a gray priest leaving the temple and following me around town would attract nothing but the kind of attention I didn’t want.

“But that doesn’t matter right now. Myne, shut it,” said Benno in a quiet voice while tracing a finger across my forehead. He then gripped my cold hands, as if to give them warmth. He was acting entirely as if his beloved had collapsed. I had zero experience with this kind of thing, even in my past life, so my struggle here went beyond embarrassment — I was just conflicted. I didn’t know how to react.

...Everyone misunderstands us because you do this kinda thing without

realizing it, Benno! As if reading my mind, Mark — sitting across from us — lowered his eyes sadly.

“Master Benno, Myne is not Liz. She will be fine.”

“...I know that. I know that, so don’t say she’ll be fine. It’s not that simple,” said Benno. He was looking out the window, but he wasn’t letting go of my hands. I couldn’t see his expression at all from here. But somehow, I got the feeling I was seeing a side of Benno that I had no right to see. It was easy to guess that Liz, his first and only love, had assured him with a smile that she would be fine while she died slowly in front of him.

I couldn’t say anything to Benno. I couldn’t squeeze his large hands back, even though they were giving me warmth. I couldn’t do anything, and eventually the carriage arrived at the Gilberta Company.

“Lutz, come to Master Benno’s office. Myne collapsed at the temple,” said Mark loudly. I could hear Lutz, who had apparently been working while waiting for me to come back, rushing over.

Lutz brought a bench to the office at Mark’s direction, and Benno laid me onto it after briefly taking his cloak back. He picked up my hanging arms and rested them on my stomach. They were surprisingly heavy. I felt him put the cloak on top of me in place of a blanket.

Lutz peered at me with worry. He touched my forehead, neck, and hands before tilting his head in confusion. “She looks exhausted, but she doesn’t have a fever. Her hands actually feel cold, and she can’t move... I’ve never seen anything like this before. Hey, Myne. What did you do today?” he asked, so I thought back to what had happened over this long, long day.

“Umm, I went to the temple, did the fealty ceremony, prayed, performed an offering, met my attendants, listened to the High Priest’s instructions, then read the bible in the book room until you came to get me. You and Mr. Benno know everything that happened afterwards.”

“Whaddaya mean by offering?”

“Ummm, pouring mana into a divine instrument. It takes away the excess heat in me and feels really nice.”

My stomach growled, interrupting my explanation. Everyone’s eyes shifted to my stomach. ...*Oh yeah, I never ate lunch. I just remembered. It slipped my mind since everything went off the rails. You definitely get hungry really quickly once you remember you haven’t eaten.*

“Well, I think I’m hungry,” I said, which lightened the grim atmosphere a bit. A small smile appeared on Mark’s face as he opened the door leading upstairs.

“If she is merely hungry without a fever, she should be fine without us for a moment. Let us bring her something to eat after

getting changed, Master Benno.” After the two of them disappeared up the stairs, Lutz brought a chair next to my bench. He sat down, furrowed his brows, and then continued, clearly wanting to know more.

“Why’re you hungry at a time like this? What’d you eat for lunch?”

“I didn’t eat lunch, that’d be a waste of reading time. I can go for two days without eating if I have books, so...”

My answer made Lutz’s jade-green eyes gleam with cold anger. He spoke, his voice sharp. “When’s the last time you did that? You’ve been trying to make books ever since becoming Myne, yeah? When was the last time you went two days reading without eating? You better not be talking about your past life before you became Myne, yeah?”

“Ah...” Lutz, who knew that I wasn’t the real Myne and had memories from my life as Urano, pointed out something that made me break out in a cold sweat. He was right. I could only go days without eating back in my past life. Although there had been times where I was too sick to eat, I had never intentionally missed a meal since becoming the weak and sickly Myne.

“Plus, using mana is like moving your Devouring heat around on purpose, right? Pretty sure you said that when you were being eaten alive by the Devouring, your temperature kept shooting up and dropping. Maybe using mana involves the same thing?”

“Mana getting sucked up into an instrument is a lot different from mana rampaging inside of me with nowhere to go.”

“Both have mana moving around. But you still skipped lunch and came all this way in your weak body without eating! What did you think was gonna happen? Idiot!” yelled Lutz, before letting out an exhausted sigh. He then took my hand and put it against his forehead. “Friggin’ cold,” he said, before looking at me with tearful eyes.

“I was so excited about the book room that I just lost sight of everything. Sorry, Lutz.”

“Don’t forget to eat! You should know yourself better!” yelled Lutz with teary eyes and my hand still in his.

“What’re you talking about? Myne or not, she’s a sick person. Be more quiet.” Benno, having hurriedly finished changing, came back down and warned Lutz off.

Lutz, grimacing, got off his chair for Benno and let go of my hand. But his emotions had to go somewhere, so he spat them out in the form of complaints. “But listen, Myne’s saying she collapsed ’cause she skipped lunch to read books. I just...”

“YOU UNBELIEVABLE IDIOT!”

“Kyaaah?!”

Benno, despite having just told Lutz to be quiet around sick people, dropped thunder so loud it felt like my heart was going to stop. But I couldn't close my ears or run away no matter how loud he yelled. I could only look at him standing over me, tears forming in my eyes.

"They say that kids with the Devouring grow slowly 'cause the mana is stealing their energy. Their nutrition. And yet you skipped a meal after using your mana?! What's wrong with you?"

"I-I mean, I didn't know that, so..."

"You should know yourself better! Pay more attention and gather what information you can, idiot!"

I knew Benno was right, but I didn't know how to gather information on the Devouring. Still, talking back unnecessarily would just be pouring oil on his burning anger.

"This is not the first time you have shown a lack of awareness, Myne, but please do take better care of yourself," Mark said. "Also, Master Benno, please do not yell at those so sick that they cannot even move." Mark was kind but unforgiving as he brought food to the table and helped prop me up to eat. "Myne, do you think you will be able to eat this?"

I could see a bowl of sick-person soup, made from cutting up hard bread and soaking it in milk, topped with honey. It was probably sweet and delicious.

"I will hold her up. Lutz, can you feed her?"

"I'm not that great at feeding people, so her clothes will probably get dirty," said Lutz, pointing at my blue robes. As blue robes were the clothes of nobility, they were high quality and expensive. It would be a big deal to spill milk onto the robes and get them stinky. Also, since they were the kind of clothes you slipped on, getting them off me while I couldn't move would be a demanding task.

"I see, this is quite the problematic situation."

"Mark, go get some crystal honey. It'll be hard to get her changed if she can't move at all."

Mark immediately left, returning soon after with small chunks of hard, crystallized honey. He put the sweet clumps of golden sugar into my mouth. They broke apart on my tongue and I could feel the sweetness spreading through me. By the time the honey was melting in my mouth, I could feel warmth returning to my body. After several more clumps of honey were put in my mouth, I managed to start licking them, at which point Benno scratched his head.

"Myne, did the High Priest say something about using mana? Something like, it might make you feel sick, or it might make something else happen?"

I thought back to what the High Priest had said earlier. "Ummm,

he said not to overburden myself when offering mana. It actually made me feel lighter, so it definitely wasn't burdening me or anything."

"I see. But you've been sick with the Devouring your whole life, which means you're used to a body full of mana, right? What's the chance that your body's acting strange since it's not used to having less mana?"

"...It's possible." I focused on the metaphorical box I stored my mana in and tried opening it up. A slight amount of heat spread through me, circulating warmth through me. I could feel the warmth building in my fingers. After putting heat in all the places lacking it, I closed the box again.

"It looks like you were right, Mr. Benno. My body's warm again."

"Don't get so warm you collapse again, alright?" Lutz immediately tossed out a warning. It seemed he knew exactly what I was likely to do.

"...I think I'll be fine." I opened and closed my warmed-up hands. They still felt stiff, but I could move them again.

Benno sighed in relief with a hand on his chest. "...Myne, all I know about the Devouring is what I learned from rumors and hearsay. Ask the High Priest for details on mana and how it works. He's still young, but he seemed sharper than most blue priests."

"...Wha? The High Priest is young?" I blinked in surprise.

"Not sure what young means to a kid like you, but as far as I could tell, he was about twenty-two or twenty-three. Though judging by how he seemed a little sheltered, he might be even younger."

"No way! He's not close to thirty? I thought for sure he was about as old as you, Mr. Benno."

"Myne. Never say that to him. Never," said Benno firmly, with kind of a scary expression.

...But he's so calm, and like, dignified. He orders people around like it's nothing. Not to mention that he's not just any priest, he's the High Priest. He has to be at least a little old. I fell into thought and tried rolling around a bit to sit up. But since I still couldn't move my body very well, I rolled right off the entire bench.

"Myne?!"

"What're you doing, idiot?!"

"I thought I was almost strong enough to sit up, so..."

The three of them raised their eyebrows at my excuses. Then Benno, Mark, and Lutz all launched into admonishments.

"You can barely move, what were you thinking?"

"Truly, we must keep our eyes on her at all times."

"I'm begging you, just sit still."

The three of them were relieved to see me a little better, which

meant their worry could now turn into anger. I could feel the angry aura radiating off them as they surrounded me, still on the floor.

“Lutz, tell Fran to give detailed daily reports on everything Myne does from now on. Where she goes, whether she uses mana or not, whether she ate lunch... Everything.”

“A reasonable request, given that nobody knows what Myne might do when not carefully managed. You think you have an eye on her, but then she ends up like this.”

Benno rapped his fingers against the table, glaring at me with frustration. Mark was smiling, but his eyes weren't smiling at all, which honestly made him look really scary. I couldn't argue against them and thus listened quietly, feeling sad, at which point Lutz jumped onto the dog pile too.

“Look as sad as you want, you're not fooling me.” Lutz, who knew me better than anyone, pointed a finger at me. “When you've got a book in front of you, there's not a chance in the world that you'd listen to your attendants or anyone else if you don't have to. If Fran says that you got mad at them getting in the way of your books, or that you skipped lunch again to read... I'm gonna ask that High Priest guy to ban you from the book room!”

...Anything but that! I guess that, thanks to everyone here, I'll be leading a healthy, well-managed life in the temple too.

Buying Secondhand Clothes

After enough mana returned to my body for me to move again, I ate the bread soup that Mark made and slowly regained my strength.

“Myne, are you gonna get casual clothes for your attendants? Or would you rather me get them for you?”

“Where should I buy their casual clothes? I’m guessing that the secondhand store my family goes to won’t be good for this, right?”

It was difficult for commoners to make new clothes given their poverty, and excluding abnormal cases such as myself, children grew steadily larger. As time passed they would need larger clothes, and their smaller clothes would become unwearable. There was no point storing useless clothes in their already small homes, so commoners tended to sell their casual clothes to a secondhand clothing store the moment they became unwearable by the youngest child. The money earned would be spent to buy secondhand clothes. This way, they would get clothes at more or less a discounted price.

Standards for outfits were low. They were fine as long as they fit, and secondhand clothes being filthy was just a matter of course. *What if they’re covered in patches? You’re lucky you get any decoration at all. What about the design? Clothes for poor people don’t have designs.* All that mattered was how thick the cloth was and how strong they were. When the cloth got too raggedy and loose to be worn, the clothes were turned into rags.

“Idiot. Don’t even think about making them wear clothes like that in the north.”

My attendants, who would presumably be following me to the Gilberta Company and back to the temple, would generally be sticking to the rich part of the city, the north. It wouldn’t be smart to have them walking around in poor, raggedy clothes like what I usually wore.

“I think I’ll let you handle all of this, Benno. I don’t know any fancy secondhand clothing stores, and I don’t know what clothes would be good for attendants, so.”

“I’ll take you to a secondhand store tomorrow if you’re not sick, then. I’ve gotta go check on how the restaurant’s coming along too, so yeah. You’re coming with me.”

“Okay.” I nodded, and Benno turned his eyes to Lutz.

“Lutz, that’d normally be your day off, but you’re coming too.”

“Sorry for wrapping you up in this, Lutz.”

“Don’t worry about it, I was just thinking I wanted to buy some casual clothes for cheap.” It seemed that Lutz, still stuck following me around even after I entered the temple, wanted some non-apprentice clothes he could wear on his days off. Unlike casual clothes, he apparently had to wash his apprentice clothes every time he wore them. A clean appearance was necessary for those working in a high-class business. But naturally, clothes get increasingly damaged the more you wash them. Lutz didn’t want to damage his apprentice outfits, but they were all he had for walking around the north part of the city.

“I’ll have to buy new apprentice outfits if I don’t have casual clothes to wear on my days off, y’know?” said Lutz, which made me want casual clothes of my own. I also only had my apprentice outfit for walking around the north of the city.

“Mr. Benno, please find some clothes for me too.” I had never gone shopping for my own clothes in this world before. Feeling excited for the shopping that awaited me tomorrow, I went home with Lutz.

“Bye, Lutz. See you tomorrow.” I waved Lutz goodbye with a smile, but he glared at me.

“I haven’t told your family what happened yet.” His words struck fear in my heart, but naturally, I had no way of stopping him...

“Why don’t you take better care of yourself, Myne?!”

“Don’t cry, Tuuli!”

“I’m not crying! I’m mad!”

I knew that Tuuli had been worried about whether or not going to the temple would actually make my Devouring better, and that she was terrified of me suddenly disappearing, so I felt biting guilt as she angrily cried at me.

“Sorry. I’m really sorry. I won’t let it happen again.”

“...You’ll eat lunch from now on?”

“Of course!” I nodded eagerly and Tuuli’s flared eyebrows lowered a bit.

“Will you talk to that important person about mana? Will you promise you won’t forget, even if you get to read books?”

“...Ngh...”

“Myne?” Tuuli glared at me, but I couldn’t make a promise I knew I wouldn’t keep. I was confident that if a book was put in front of me, I would forget every promise I ever made.

“...I-I’ll tell my attendant so he can remind me if I forget. He’s a serious person, it’ll be fine!”

“Haaah. I guess you won’t make promises you can’t keep, huh?”

Tuuli shook her head in exasperation, but seriously, I had no confidence in keeping that promise. My whole family was exasperated at me, but they weren't as mad as they were before, so I changed the topic.

"Hey, Tuuli. If you have tomorrow off, do you want to go shopping with me? I'm going to buy clothes for my attendants tomorrow, like, rich clothes for people in the north of the city, so maybe it'll be good for your studies." Not to mention that Benno would be the one picking out clothes. He was the owner of a store dealing with clothes for nobles. No doubt Tuuli would learn a lot from him.

"We have a lot of things to do tomorrow, so you'll have to follow us around other places too, but if you're okay with that..."

"Okay, sounds fun!" said Tuuli with a wide smile. The sight of her usual bright smile made me sigh in relief. *Whew... Looks like she's not mad anymore.*

"Tuuli? What, you're not gonna go to the forest with us?" As Tuuli, Lutz, and I held hands on our way to the main street past the well, we heard a sharp voice calling out to us from behind.

"Oh, Ralph."

We turned around and saw that Lutz's older brother Ralph had run after us, a basket on his back. He was dressed to go to the forest and he was grimacing a bit as he looked at us — Lutz and I in our apprentice uniforms and Tuuli in her cleanest clothes.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna go learn about clothes. You're going to the forest, right?" Tuuli often went to the forest on her days off so she could meet her friends and chat, but unlike before, she didn't absolutely have to go to the forest to keep the family budget afloat. Our financial situation was a lot better thanks to me and her having jobs, not to mention me not getting sick as often as before.

In contrast, Lutz's family consisted of four growing boys that ate up food and therefore money. Their finances were still tight even with all of their kids working. Apprentices weren't paid much, so if they weren't careful about going to the forest regularly, it was possible they might end up with less food than before. It was natural, then, that going to the forest on their days off was a regular thing for them, and that Lutz's family did not think highly of him going to the store on his day off. Lutz had mentioned that they would rather him get stuff directly from the forest than give them more apprentice money.

On the way to the main street, Tuuli walked next to Ralph while Lutz walked a little behind them, looking uncomfortable. I walked while holding hands with Lutz and saw him sigh at Ralph, who was

occasionally glancing back at him.

“Bye, Ralph. Good luck in the forest!”

“Yeah.” Once reaching the main street, Ralph headed to the south while we headed to the north. Tuuli enthusiastically waved Ralph goodbye while taking hold of my other hand.

We then headed north along the main street. Tuuli was so excited to learn about clothes that she spent the whole time talking about them. Lutz used the opportunity to practice being a good listener like Mark had taught him.

I suddenly felt eyes on my back and turned around to see Ralph where we had left him, standing in place and looking at us like he had something to say. The second we made eye contact, he hurriedly turned around and raced south, as if he had been caught in the middle of doing something bad. The distance growing between us as he ran felt symbolic for the growing emotional distance between Lutz and his brothers, a thought which made me lower my eyes sadly.

When we arrived at the Gilberta Company, we found Benno working and already prepared to leave at any moment. He was giving instructions to Mark and several other employees.

“You’re with Tuuli today? Alright. Corinna was talking about how you’ll be a real good seamstress when you grow up, Tuuli,” Benno complimented Tuuli with a friendly smile.

“Really?! That’s so nice!”

We were going out with Benno, not Mark like usual. It seemed he needed to personally check the construction site for the Italian restaurant to make sure it was being built according to his specifications, without any of the materials being switched out for cheaper ones or anything of the sort.

“So the restaurant’s already being built, then?”

“Yup, I found a good place sooner than I expected. They’re in the middle of expanding the kitchen right now.”

Benno had bought an old restaurant from the Eatery Guild, located in the north of the city. It was in the middle of being renovated. Once the oven was put into the expanded kitchen, all the wood flooring would be replaced and the interior decoration would be swapped out with more expensive furnishings fit for a restaurant selling food good enough for nobles. The idea was to be a high-class eatery where somewhat wealthy people could feel like they were nobles.

“Once the restaurant’s finished, I’ll invite several merchants that do business with nobles and see what they think of the place.”

“Oh, you’re learning from the guildmaster—”

“No! You’re the one who thought up the idea for that taste-testing event, I didn’t learn anything from the guildmaster.”

“...Oh, okay.”

As far as I could tell, there was no issue with the lumber, bricks, or iron, nor was there an issue with the construction itself. The oven wasn't installed yet, but once it was, Benno would hire a chef and train them prior to the store's opening.

“I'm glad things are going well,” I said after Benno carried me around within the under-construction building, though that just made him frown. He whispered in a quiet voice only I could hear.

“Nah, there's a mountain of problems here.”

“Wha?”

“...Nothing you should know about. C'mon, we're leaving,” he said, calling out to Lutz and Tuuli. We started walking toward a secondhand clothing store with deep connections to the Gilberta Company. Tuuli came skipping toward us, her braid bouncing as she looked back at the store.

“What kind of food do nobles eat? I really want to try noble food at least once!” Lutz and Tuuli were walking behind Benno, so I looked over his shoulder at them while thinking about recipes.

“Mmm, for this restaurant food at least, about thirty percent of it is stuff we've eaten at home. Fifty percent of it is new stuff and sweets that need an oven. The last twenty percent is kind of like Leise's modified recipes, kinda.”

Tuuli made a weird face. “...Wait, is that restaurant going to serve your weird food, Myne?”

“Tuuli, don't call my food weird! You always love eating it!” I slumped over, depressed that my sister would call my food weird despite loving it, and Tuuli hurriedly corrected herself.

“It tastes good! It tastes super good. I just think the chef will be really surprised when he makes one of your recipes for the first time. I'm used to them already, though.”

“Anything's fine as long as it tastes good, right? Right?” Lutz shrugged and agreed, but he didn't say my food wasn't weird. I guess it was hard to argue when my cooking methods were indeed abnormal here.

“...What, you two have eaten Myne's cooking before?” Since the restaurant was under construction and he hadn't hired a chef yet, Benno was the only one among us who hadn't eaten my cooking yet.

Lutz and Tuuli looked at each other with conflicted expressions.

“Mmm, we use Myne's recipes, but... You know what I mean, Lutz?”

“Yeah, we have to make it ourselves. Doesn't really feel like we're eating Myne's cooking.”

...*Okay, that's fair.* Everyone else was growing steadily while I stayed the same, so there was an enormous difference in size and

strength between us. From the perspective of someone on Earth, it would be like the difference between a preschooler and an elementary schooler, or even a middle schooler. There was that much of a difference between our heights, how far we could reach, how strong we were, and so on. There was a world of difference in our physical abilities, no matter the situation. I remained unable to do basically anything, while they became increasingly capable of doing things without the help of any parents.

“I wanna grow, too...” My sad murmur reached the ears of only Benno, thanks to him carrying me. But I hadn’t intended to speak aloud, so I let out a choke of surprise when he patted my back.

My lack of growth was due to my Devouring, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. If Tuuli or Lutz heard my complaining, they would definitely just get sad. I peered at them to make sure they hadn’t heard me and let out a sigh of relief after seeing them talking about which of my recipes was their favorite.

Both the restaurant and the secondhand store were in the north of town, so it didn’t take long to reach our destination. As expected, the northern secondhand store was completely different from the one my family generally went to. The place I was used to organized clothes roughly by size via large baskets with mountains of dirty gray and brown clothes heaped within. This store, likely due to the quality of the colorful clothes, hung everything but underwear on cross-shaped hangers. Since everything had originally been made to order, what you saw was what you got. It resembled the kind of small clothing store you might find in a smallish Japanese town, where there were no variations in size or color for particular outfits — there was just the one outfit of each type, with the one size and color scheme.

As soon as we entered the store, a woman who seemed to be the owner of the store opened her eyes wide and came rushing over. She had tightly bound dark-brown hair and both her eyes with sparkling with curiosity.

“Goodness, Benno. What brings you here? When did you have so many children?”

“What are you prattling on about?”

“Be a dear and play along, Benno. You just came into my store with a pack of children following you along. You can bet I will blow this as far out of proportion as I can to have some fun gossiping with the girls.”

“Quit it, you’re not funny.”

We watched the two of them — obviously close friends — duel with words, our eyes wide, until soon enough Benno interrupted the woman and stated his business.

“I’m here to buy some clothes for them. While we’re at it, my

apprentice there can learn a bit about how clothes work.”

“Your apprentice? Wait, why are you going to make Lutz learn too?”

“Come on, Myne. An apprentice at my store’s gotta know how to pick out good clothing. That’s not even a question,” said Benno, making Lutz flinch. He and Tuuli, having grown up in an environment where the strength of clothes mattered more than anything else, had never developed a knack for identifying quality clothes. Benno intended to fix that.

Benno went on, “Myne, the clothes around here should be good enough for your attendants. Their designs are on the newer side and their short sleeves should be good for work.”

“Out of the clothes in this section, I think that dark green one or the brown one would look best on him. What do you think? He’s a serious, tightly wound kind of person, so I think his clothes should match the color of his eyes and hair.”

“...Yeah, sounds good to me. Can’t say anything about the other two though, I haven’t seen them. You should be fine if you follow the same kind of thought process. Just pick whatever you want.”

“Okaaay.” Benno set me down, so I started looking through the child-sized clothes for outfits that would look good on Gil or Delia. He said I could pick whatever I wanted, but since there were only so many outfits of the same size, my options were fairly limited. I naturally chose my picks pretty fast. All that was left was comparing clothes with Lutz and making sure the new clothes were the right size.

...Haaah. I reaaally wish there were more clothes here. My dreams of spending a fun day clothes shopping was ruined, and my enthusiasm plummeted immediately. Only now did I know what excess I had lived in back on Earth. Clothes had surrounded me at every turn. I had little interest in fashion at the time, but the moment clothes vanished, I found myself wanting them. How annoying.

“Lutz, Lutz, do you have a second?”

“What’s up, Myne?”

“Gil is like, the exact same height as you, so I want to see if this shirt will fit on you.” I spread out the three outfits and held them up against Lutz. They all seemed to be the right size. With that done, I held out one of the outfits to Lutz.

“Out of all these clothes, I think this one looks the best on you, Lutz. This one’s probably the best for Gil, maybe...” As I compared Gil’s potential clothes, Benno let out a sigh.

“Myne, where’d you learn to pick out clothes?”

“Where...? Um, I’ve never studied clothes anywhere.” I had read several books about color coordination and all sorts of magazines about attire, but I never studied any of it, so to speak. At most, the

topic of clothes came up at school sometimes.

“Guess it’s a waste of time to question anything about you, huh?”

“Uh huh. It’ll be better for everyone if you just don’t think about it. Lutz, let’s try this one out next.” I held up a dress I was getting for Delia, and Lutz shook his head hard. He crossed his arms in an X shape to ward off the cute red dress.

“Ask Tuuli for that, come on! I don’t wanna.”

“But Tuuli is still bigger than you. Delia is smaller. It has to be you.” Lutz didn’t like it, but I held Delia’s clothes against his back to check them. But like I said, Tuuli and I weren’t Delia’s size. It had to be him, there was no helping it.

“Alright, Lutz. Start by looking for colors that’ll look good on Myne. Look at that green one and that green one. They’re both green, but not the same kind of green. Which would look better on Myne?” Just like I had been putting clothes against him, Lutz started putting clothes against me. Both he and Tuuli looked between the clothes and me with serious expressions, then pointed firmly at the same outfit.

“This one!”

“Right. That one looks better with Myne’s skin. But what about these two?” Benno’s lecture on primary colors, secondary colors, complementary colors, analogous colors, saturation, and so on began as he pressed clothes against me to serve as examples. I found it fascinating that his sum of knowledge, accumulated through years of experience, could quite possibly be compiled into a book pretty similar to the color coordination book I had read in the past. I contemplated the subject in depth as outfit after outfit was pushed against me.

“Once you’ve figured out what colors will look good on the customer, you start working on the design. Clothes, more than anything else, are a sign of one’s status and position. Nothing but trouble will come from wearing the clothes of a social class higher than yours. The closest example for you two will be Myne’s baptism outfit.”

“Aww...”

“This time, we’re picking clothes that Myne will wear when going in and out of the temple. Her sleeves will be important, then, as someone who has attendants.” That reminded me, Benno wore an outfit with exceptionally large sleeves when he went to the temple. The sleeves were so long they looked like they would get in the way no matter what he was doing.

“Large sleeves indicate that attendants will do all the work for you, such that you won’t need to worry about your clothes getting dirty or in the way. Those actually doing the work will need tighter sleeves.”

“Wait, but weren’t Mr. Mark’s sleeves really long too? They weren’t half as long as yours, but still.”

“That was a special outfit for meeting with a noble. We knew their attendants would handle the work and Mark wouldn’t be doing much. On the other hand, if a noble came to visit me, Mark would need to cater to their needs in an outfit with short sleeves. Not that a noble would come directly to our store,” explained Benno.

I nodded absentmindedly, not extremely interested, but Tuuli and Lutz were listening with sparkling eyes.

“Alright. With all that in mind, go pick an outfit for Myne. Who’s gonna pick the better outfit, Lutz or Tuuli?” The two of them glared at each other, then walked through the store, picking out clothes. Benno cackled in amusement at them. “Good thinking Myne, bringing Tuuli along. People grow a lot faster if they’ve got someone to compete with.”

“Tuuli’s learning a lot from this too, so it’s fine with me.” As I watched the two of them fervently trying to pick out the best clothes and master what they had been taught, I tried asking Benno more about noble society, but he just shook his head.

“You and I are in different situations. All I know is from the perspective of a merchant doing business with merchants. You need to know how nobles act among nobles, and Fran’s the best person to ask about that. Give precise questions about anything that comes to mind, just like Lutz is. If you don’t say anything, nobody will know that you aren’t understanding something,” said Benno. I nodded in return, just as the two rivals came rushing this way with clothes in hand.

“Which do you like more, Myne?” Tuuli asked.

“Bwuh...? Ummm...” Frightened by how Lutz and Tuuli were ganging up on me, I nervously looked at the clothes they had picked out. Tuuli had chosen a cute pink dress, whereas Lutz had picked a nice blue dress.

“Tuuli’s outfit is more cute and would be better for walking outside, but Lutz’s outfit is more formal and would be better for going inside the temple. This is a hard choice.”

“Try wearing them,” suggested Benno, so I took the outfits to a changing room with the store’s owner. She first changed me into Tuuli’s outfit, then stood me in front of a well-polished mirror-shaped piece of metal.

“...Woow.” It was the first time I saw my own face. My skin was less “delicate white akin to the purest eggs” and more kinda gross with a sickly looking pallor. My straight, dark-blue hair stood out against my skin and made its paleness stick out more, though probably in a good way. My round yellow eyes were visible in the mirror like chunks of gold, and they were opened wide in surprise. My

shapely nose and lips resembled Mom's, but aside from the shape of my eyes, I didn't resemble Tuuli very much.

If one looked at me with the generosity given to children, then from an Earth perspective, I was without complaint a cute little girl. But I wasn't sure how those of this world would judge my appearance. Lutz called me cute, so I could imagine that our worlds shared a general sense of bodily aesthetics. Feeling a bit conflicted, I left the room to show off the outfit.

"Wow! Myne, you're so cute! It looks perfect on you." Tuuli lavished me with praise as I stood there in the outfit she picked out, but Lutz didn't seem so convinced. Though judging by the frustrated expression on his face, the outfit suited me enough that it was difficult for him to criticize it much. Benno waved his hand with an unimpressed smile, as if to tell me to go get changed into the other one.

"I knew it, this one looks way better on you!" When I returned wearing Lutz's outfit, he immediately complimented me with a bright smile on his face. Tuuli pursed her lips and said her outfit looked better on me, which started an argument between them.

I looked to Benno for help as the argument escalated, only to see him looking around the store while stroking his chin. "You saw yourself in the mirror, right? Which clothes here do you think suit you best?"

"Well... Considering what I'll need them for, maybe these three?" I first picked out a white blouse. It had long sleeves, plus lace decorations along the sleeves and by the neck. It seemed like the best thing here for wearing around nobles. I then picked out a blue skirt that would be perfect for when I went to the temple. It had flower embroidering, but that would be hidden once I put on my shrine maiden robes. Finally, I picked out a red bodice-like vest with lace and flower embroidering.

"With these three forming an outfit, I can replace or swap out individual parts to change how the outfit feels as a whole. I think I can wear these along with my apprentice uniform to maximize my options. How does that sound?" I looked up and saw Benno smirking while looking at Lutz and Tuuli. They were both stunned, looking at the clothes I had picked out with shocked expressions.

"Lutz. Tuuli. There are more than just dresses here. You have to abandon the idea that girls only wear dresses." In general, poor girls only ever wore dresses. It would take extra cloth to make a blouse and a skirt instead of just a single dress. Although sometimes girls would wear layers to fight off the cold, they never wore pants for fashion or anything like that. They didn't have blouses with lace on the sleeves or removable collars. They just didn't exist.

“Study hard before we come here again.” The two of them had been slumped over sadly, but after hearing that, they lifted their heads up and for some reason looked at me, their eyes burning with the determination and enthusiasm of a newly born rivalry.

The Animosity of Lutz and Gil

“Lots of stuff to carry this time, huh?” said Lutz with a shrug after coming to get me in the morning and seeing the clothes packed into my basket. The basket, which I normally used for gathering in the forest, had a bunch of clothes wrapped in cloth inside it. There was Fran, Delia, and Gil’s clothes, my blue robe and sash, and finally, the three pieces of clothing I had bought yesterday.

The clothes I had bought were cute and kind of looked like a folk costume, but the lack of patches, the neat embroidery, and the long sleeves with lace on them would all stick out here. Kids in my part of the city simply did not wear clothes like that. Who knew what people would say if I walked around wearing them.

After being warned off by my family, we settled on Lutz and me going to Benno’s store in our normal clothes, then getting changed in Lutz’s room. The longer you spent in the north, the more fancy and expensive things got. It was normal for the people up north, so there was no helping that. But if I wasn’t careful, I would be signaling that I carried expensive stuff on me, which would make my daily commute dangerous.

Our apprentice outfits didn’t stick out since it was normal for parents to buy new clothes for their kids after their baptism, but we would definitely attract attention if we wore fancy new clothes out of the blue. *It might be a good idea to ask Benno to give me a room of my own at his store.*

“And that’s the situation. Can you lend a cheap room to me as well?” I asked Benno to lend me a room while I waited in his office for Lutz to finish changing. Benno, who had been battling with a stack of wooden boards, glared at me with a thoroughly annoyed expression.

“I can lend you a room, but cheap ones will be up in the attic, y’know? Do you wanna climb all those stairs each time you need to change clothes or store something?”

I let out a little “eek,” remembering how exhausting it was just to climb up the five floors to get back home. “...I think it’ll be fine if I climb them really, really slowly.”

“Something tells me that’s not true. And actually, don’t you have a room in the temple? What’ll you do when someone visits you?”

“Visits me?” My plan was to go to the temple just to read and

expend mana, which didn't involve anyone visiting me. I tilted my head in confusion and Benno set down his pen to look at me.

"Usually, Lutz would be taken to your room when he comes to get you. What happened instead?"

"...Lutz waited at the front gate while a gray priest came to the library to get me. Ummm, so basically, I should negotiate to have the book room be made into my room?"

"Are you out of your mind?!"

"Sorry, I just said that because I really wanted it to happen." I knew they would never let me live in a room filled with valuable books. My dreams were just dreams.

"Ugh. Anyway. If you don't have a room there, ask the High Priest to assign you one before the day is up."

"Why today?"

"Lutz's job for today is to tell Fran about how to manage your health, and he needs a place to do that."

"Okay. I'll talk to the High Priest."

Once the conversation drew to a close, Benno rang a bell on his desk. A servant woman immediately appeared from behind the door.

"Did you call for me?"

"Help her change. Myne, you can use that screen to hide yourself if you want. You're not gonna make it up to the attic."

...Wait. He's telling me to change in his office?! I nearly yelled my thoughts, but swallowed them back down. Benno had picked up his pen and gotten right back to work after giving the woman his orders, and she was already setting up the screen to secure a changing space for me. They were both being so casual about it that me panicking would just be weird. I couldn't think of a single way to get out of the situation smoothly.

"...Um, Mr. Benno. You don't need to do this for me, I'll be fine if I go up the stairs slowly."

"Don't waste your precious stamina before you even leave in the first place." Benno crushed my weak resistance with a single line.

Well... He is worried about me, and he's doing this for my sake, and I'm just a kid, and it won't be embarrassing if I don't think it's embarrassing, so... Aaah, no! It's too embarrassing to pretend it isn't!

"Um..."

"Which clothes are you changing into? These? Okay, they're ready. Please come here."

"Try and finish before Lutz gets back, yeah?"

Everything was ready for me to change before I could turn them down. I gave up and headed behind the screen.

"...Well, I guess I will then." I wanted the embarrassment to end as soon as possible. The older servant lady helped me change behind

the screen fairly quickly. She took off my dress in one go and put the blouse on, which reached to my thighs and thus covered me enough to calm me down.

I helped her do about half of the buttons, then she adjusted the skirt around my waist and tightened the bodice strings. She then put on the hairpin that Benno gave me, and with that I was fully changed.

"Mr. Benno, it's done. Thank you." I came out from behind the screen with my removed clothes in my arms and Benno lifted his head to look me over from head to toe.

"...Yeah, you look the part now."

"Wha? Wha? I look the part? Are you saying I look like a rich girl? Am I cute?"

"Maybe if you kept your mouth shut."

"Bwuh?" I fell silent and started putting my normal clothes into the basket, at which point Mark entered with Lutz.

"Excuse us, Master Benno. Oh, hello Myne. I see you have finished changing."

"Mr. Benno helped."

".....Master Benno?"

"Myne, you moron! You abbreviated too much! Mark, I just called Matilda to help her." Benno scratched his head and jerked his chin in the direction of Matilda, who was folding up the screen.

Mark nodded in understanding and guided Lutz forward. Benno glanced at Lutz, then nodded after seeing the wooden board in his hands.

"Alright. Lutz, your job today is to go to the temple and talk to Myne's attendant, Fran, about managing her health. You've finished organizing what you're going to tell him?"

"Yes, Master Benno." Lutz gave a polite salute just like Mark might and left the room with my basket. The sight of him behaving just like a proper store employee made me feel like a mother watching her child do well at his first job. *Aaah, Lutz has really grown up, huh?*

"Lutz, your posture and speech are both a lot better now, aren't they?"

"I've still got a long way to go, but yeah, this is part of my job." Lutz beamed a proud smile. To be honest, I found it inspiring that he was working hard and feeling proud of himself. I had a lot to learn from him.

"I need to learn to talk like a noble lady at the temple, just like you've learned to be polite in the store."

"...You think you can manage that?"

"Benno didn't say I was messing up, so I think I can manage it just fine. It'll just take some time to get used to it. Um... Don't laugh when you hear me talk at the temple, okay? Even if it doesn't sound like

me.” If Lutz laughed at me, my fancy speech would collapse in an instant.

“Do I gotta talk politely too?”

“Mr. Benno was unbelievably polite when he talked to the High Priest, who’s a noble. I think it would be smart to try and be polite at the temple.”

“R-Right...”

When we reached the temple, all three of my attendants were waiting at the gate. At first I wondered how they had known to wait for me, but then Lutz told me the Gilberta Company had sent out a messenger. Apparently it was important to give advance warning for something as simple as returning home. Noble society sure was unbelievably tedious.

Anyway... What should I say to them? “I’m home”? “I have indeed returned”?

“Eheh, I bet you got in trouble.”

“Bwuh?” I was planning on talking like a noble girl once returning to the temple, but Delia tripped me up before I could begin. I let out a silly-sounding noise and tilted my head in confusion as Fran forced his way in front of Delia.

“Welcome back, Sister Myne. I have awaited your safe return.”

“Fran, I have returned. Did anything happen while I was gone, perhaps?” I readjusted myself and spoke to Fran. He crossed his arms reverently in front of his chest and bent his knee.

“All is well, with nothing of note to report.”

“What do you mean, all is well?! Myne, you brought a visitor but didn’t have your attendants with you! I bet you were super embarrassed! Heh, and that’s perfect.”

I hated to spoil her incredibly smug mood, but I didn’t remember embarrassing myself at all. In fact, Fran did his job so well that their absence was actually a big plus for me.

“...Fran was there for me.”

“Hmph! There’s not much a single attendant can do. You couldn’t even offer any flowers. I bet your visitor was super disappointed in you.”

Um... Offer flowers? Is that a euphemism for something? If so, I don’t think I want to know what for. But either way, Benno left the temple very satisfied since he got to meet the High Priest, his gifts were appreciated, and he managed to secure a good deal for the distribution of the Myne Workshop’s profits. I wasn’t sure what was going on in her head, but it seemed like Delia wanted me to say that I had gotten into trouble. It was a pain, but the sooner this conversation ended the better.

“Ummm, yeah, okay. I got in big trouble. It was awful.”

“Eheh. I knew it.”

“Sister Myne, what are you...?” whispered Fran.

“Delia’s so annoying that dealing with her is causing me trouble. I’m just getting her off my back.”

Fran lowered his eyes, understanding what I meant. I glanced at the basket of clothes on Lutz’s back, then looked at Delia and tilted my head.

“Delia, what can I do to make you take serving me seriously?”

“You think I would ever serve you?! Don’t be stupid! Gosh, I’ve never seen someone as dumb as you.” Delia gave a smug smile and turned around to go off somewhere. To be honest, her being so self-centered and rude was actually a relief, since I wouldn’t feel guilty if I had to ask the High Priest to send her away.

“...Uh, Myne. Who was that?”

“One of my attendants, technically.”

“Seriously? *That’s* what counts as an attendant here?” asked Lutz, pointing at Delia’s back as she left. It seemed his plan to be polite was just practice, and had already fallen apart. I could sympathize with that. The same would happen to me if I wasn’t careful about it.

“It is rude of me to interject, but I must state that she is an outlier.” Fran immediately protested, likely due to feeling that his profession had been insulted. Personal attendants such as mine were generally skilled like Fran, so maybe it was safe to call Delia an outlier for aiming to be the High Bishop’s mistress.

“Fran is a much better attendant. Delia has problems, as you saw, but...”

“Huh. Well, I’m glad they’re not all like her. That would be a nightmare,” said Lutz, nodding, which was the perfect time for the other problem child to strike.

Gil glared at Lutz and pointed a sharp finger at him. “And what’re you even doing at temple, huh? You don’t belong here.”

“Who’s that?” Lutz asked with a grimace. But his outfit and the context probably meant he already knew who he was.

“My attendant.”

“Please think of him as an outlier as well.”

“So you’re her only decent attendant, Fran?! The heck is going on here?!”

Fran immediately identified Gil as another outlier, but that didn’t really help his case. As Lutz had only seen my three attendants, Fran, being the minority, was the one who seemed like an outlier to him. As Fran and I held our heads in frustration, Gil looked at Lutz and barked in anger.

“What’s with you, jerk?! You’re an outsider, you don’t know squat!”

“I’m Lutz of the Gilberta Company. I manage Myne’s health. I came here to teach Myne’s attendants how to manage her health, but with immature kids like you serving her, I dunno...” Lutz looked incredibly disappointed, as he had been somewhat excited to practice being polite on the same level that Benno had been with the High Priest.

“Sorry, Lutz. This is all because I’m inexperienced as a master.”

“It’s an attendant’s job to support their master as they grow up, isn’t it? You don’t need people who can’t even do their job right. Cut off anyone that’s not motivated. That girl from a second ago is definitely just trying to give you a hard time.”

Lutz was right, but as these attendants had been assigned to me by the second-highest authority in the temple, I couldn’t fire them that easily.

“Well, I’m kinda being saved by her incompetence, so I’m not too worried about it right now.”

“Her incompetence?”

“Delia’s spying on me for the High Bishop. I would rather have an incompetent spy that tells me what she’s doing than a good spy doing stuff behind my back.” Delia was definitely better than a spy too good at their job for me to handle. Lutz shrugged, clearly not envious of my situation.

“...Hey, shortie. You making fun of us? You looking down on us?” Gil glared at me and Lutz with his eyes contorted angrily. He was probably addressing me, given the “shortie,” but I had no intention of replying to him.

“Fran, I have a request for you.”

“Yes, Sister Myne?”

“Hey! Don’t ignore me! Don’t make fun of me!” yelled Gil before giving my arm a hard pull. He was so much taller and stronger than me that I, with my four-year-old body and strength, could do nothing to resist the force of his pull.

“Kyaaah?!” In the end I was flung sideways, where Lutz caught me in a hug. For a second I didn’t know what had happened and I sat on my knees in front of Lutz, blinking rapidly.

I slowly looked around and saw Fran looking at me, his eyes wide and his arm outstretched. He had apparently reached for me, but not made it in time. Gil was looking between his hand and me in disbelief, having not expected to throw me that easily.

“Myne, are you okay?”

“I’m okay, since you caught me. What about you, Lutz?”

“Meh. Is he really your attendant? Seems kinda like a wild animal to me.” Lutz’s voice was calm, but his eyes were burning with anger. His eye color was even a bit lighter than normal. It actually scared me

to see just how furious Lutz was.

“He’s not trained at all, but I don’t have the time, motivation, or investment to bother trying to fix that... Especially since I’m so weak and stuff.”

“Alright, I’ll do it for you then,” said Lutz quietly as he stood me up, made sure I wasn’t hurt, then handed me over to Fran. He then immediately jumped at Gil and pounded him in the face as hard as he could. “You idiot! What if Myne got hurt?!”

It was normal for commoner children to get in fights, but there was an unspoken rule that you should be very careful about who you fight with. Commoners relied on their bodies for everything. Going too far could destroy someone’s family or life, so only picking fights with someone your own size was like an iron law. And Gil had just broken that law. If Gil had stuck to badmouthing me, Lutz would have shrugged it off and let the argument end with words. But Gil had laid his hands on me, in front of Lutz even, who had been told by both my family and Benno to protect me. Not to mention that I was supposed to be Gil’s master.

“Whaddaya think you’re doing?!”

“That’s my line! What kind of attendant hurts their master, you stupid idiot!” In the commoner part of the city it was normal for someone to get beaten up after starting a fight, so I just silently watched Lutz smack Gil into the dirt, thinking that it would be nice if this would make Gil be more obedient.

“Sister Myne, erm, should you not stop Lutz...?”

“Why would I? It’s a master’s duty to discipline their servants. Lutz is just doing it for me right now. It’s really a big help. I don’t have the arm strength to fight anyone.” *Or the motivation*, I added on the inside, as Fran anxiously looked between Gil getting smacked and me watching it.



“When disciplining servants, it is normal to send them to the repentance chamber, or limit their divine gifts for a day... Erm, you mustn’t encourage violence.” It seemed that the temple had very different forms of discipline than the lower city.

“Lutz, that should be enough.”

“Nah, he doesn’t get it yet. He’s still asking why I’m hitting him.”

“Apparently you’re not supposed to hit people in the temple.”

“Huh? How else are you gonna discipline someone?”

“They do other things here,” I explained, which made Lutz click his tongue in frustration and let go of Gil. Aside from the first punch, he had just been smacking him with his palm, so Gil didn’t seem that visibly hurt.

“Sheesh. Not only is he not doing his job, he’s even hurting you, Myne. He’s the worst. Too dangerous to leave around you. You should fire him.”

“That shortie’s not doing her job either! She’s not giving me what she should be!” Gil stood up and glared at me, holding his cheek. It seemed there was yet more basic stuff about the temple I still didn’t know.

“Well, Fran. What exactly should I be giving him?”

“You don’t even know?! You’re the biggest idiot here!” yelled Gil before Fran could reply. Nothing would be accomplished with Gil yelling in the background and interrupting. He already knew I didn’t know anything about the temple, but he was still whining about it without explaining anything. Just how dumb was he?

“You really are dumb, Gil. I just said earlier that I don’t know anything about the temple. I didn’t grow up here. I just don’t know this stuff. So why do you think I know? Don’t you understand by now that I was born a commoner in the lower city and don’t know everything you know? What exactly are you expecting from me?”

“Ngh...!” Gil fell silent and glared at me, gritting his teeth.

Lutz stood in front of me protectively and looked at Gil head-on. “You’re being all cocky about her having stuff she should be giving you, but you know what? You don’t deserve anything if you’re not doing your job! What’s wrong with you, thinking you should get stuff without doing any work?”

“Gifts from the gods are given to everyone equally! Higher classes get the gifts first, but it’s still all equal! Working has nothing to do with it!”

“Huh?!” I looked at Lutz in confusion, not understanding Gil at all, then asked Fran for clarification. “Fran. Would you please explain this to me? What exactly should I be giving him?”

What They Deserve

Fran looked at me and Gil, then slowly began to speak. "It is the duty of blue priests and shrine maidens to distribute divine gifts to those beneath them, with those divine gifts being food, clothing, and shelter. When blue priests and shrine maidens enter the temple, they give their attendants clothes and a room, such that they can live with their master."

"And since I have no chambers in the temple, Gil has remained in the orphanage despite becoming my attendant?" I asked, and Fran nodded in return.

"Additionally, regarding food, it is customary that food is cooked for the master. The leftovers are given to their attendants and apprentice attendants, then what is left over beyond that is given to the orphanage as a divine gift. It is natural that the gifts given to attendants are greater than what those in the orphanage receive."

My goal had been to avoid being separated from my family and put in the orphanage, so when I was allowed to commute to the temple from home, I rejoiced without ever thinking about how my attendants would suffer from me breaking customs.

"Did you get sent back to the orphanage from the High Priest's quarters due to becoming my attendant, Fran?" If so, it was even more understandable that he had felt like he was being punished. He was going out of his way to help me, but for nothing in return. Worse than nothing, even. I had intended to give him his first pay soon, but perhaps I would need to talk to the High Priest about his living conditions first.

"No, my room is still within the High Priest's quarters, and I imagine that Delia has not been moved either. I am helping the High Priest with his paperwork while you are absent, so I am eating there as well."

That reminded me. The High Priest was flooded with work and had mentioned he didn't have enough workers to help him. There was no chance he would let Fran sit around doing nothing while I was absent, skilled as he was. I sighed in relief, glad to hear that Fran hadn't descended into suffering for my sake.

"So in short, only Gil is suffering right now?"

"I believe that he had been hoping for his living condition to improve, and now is angry because it has remained unchanged. Divine

gifts are given to those in the orphanage regardless of whether they do work. But one can improve their situation by working as an attendant. I feel somewhat frustrated that he thought that he would receive more divine blessings despite not properly doing his job as an attendant,” said Fran, who clearly felt pride in his job, while glancing at Gil.

“...Fran, if you are not having any problems, I think I will keep things with you as they are, and if at some point you begin having problems, I will think of a solution then. What do you think?”

“If that is what you wish to do, then so be it,” replied Fran with a quiet nod after pausing to think for a moment, probably comparing his current living situation to what it would be like to live in my chambers. Just when I thought that signaled the end of the conversation, Gil started barking again.

“Fran this, Fran that, what about me?! I’m your attendant too!”

“...That’s weird. I seem to recall you stating that you don’t consider me to be your master. Why would I provide you with divine gifts when I am not your master?” Gil’s behavior was hard to understand if he really wanted me to improve his living situation.

“That’s what blue shrine maidens are supposed to do! A-And anyway, if you’re not gonna give me food or a room, why would I work for you?! What’s in it for me?!”

“Wages.” I considered it important to pay my attendants a fair wage, just like Benno and Mark were paying Lutz. Naturally, the payment would depend on the quality and quantity of their work. As things were, I would never pay Fran and Gil the same.

Gil blinked in surprise several times, then murmured “What’s a wage?” with his head tilted.

Lutz laughed and basically repeated what Gil had said to me. “You seriously don’t know that? It’s just common sense that you get wages for working.”

“N-No it isn’t!”

“A wage is one’s payment for working. I’ll be paying money to the attendants who do work for me.”

“Money...? A-Ah, yeah, money. Hmmm.” It seemed that Gil didn’t know what money was. His eyes wavered, then, after making eye contact with Lutz, he nodded while pretending to know what it was.

“Fran’s working hard for me, so I am more than willing to extend a helping hand on his behalf, but I have no intention of bothering to negotiate with the High Priest to help an attendant who isn’t even working for me. That will take away from my reading time.” My reading time was already limited due to having to help the High Priest in the morning and eat lunch afterwards. I didn’t want to waste any more of it. “Now then, Fran. Would you please take me to the High Priest? I must assist him with his paperwork until noon.”

“As you wish.” Fran took the lead with Lutz and I following behind, and Gil even further behind.

“Hey, if I do my work, things’ll actually change?”

“Of course. I pay a proper wage for good work.”

“Excuse me, High Priest. Sister Myne has arrived.”

“Ah, there you are. How are you feeling?” The High Priest looked up from his desk.

“Sorry for worrying you. I’m fine now. It seems that I collapsed due to the offering ceremony. Is one’s health affected by whether or not the body is completely filled with mana?”

“You might die if you are completely drained of mana, but I have never heard of anyone getting sick due to not filling their body with mana. Perhaps this is a trait unique to those with the Devouring?”

The High Priest put his pen down and briefly shut his eyes, searching through his memories for an answer.

“It is very rare for children with the Devouring to be discovered. In particular, those with great amounts of mana die incredibly young, so they have not been well studied. You are beyond a rare case. To my knowledge, not a single commoner child with as much mana as you has survived to reach their baptism, if any have been born at all. I would like to investigate this at some point.”

The High Priest stared at me with eyes resembling that of a mad scientist who had just discovered a perfect test subject, which sent shivers down my spine. In order to escape his curiosity-filled gaze, I quickly changed the subject.

“I have other questions. Are there any religious events where only blue priests are summoned to the Noble’s Quarter? If there are any special clothes I need to prepare, knowing now would be for the best.”

“There are throughout the year, but not many that you as an apprentice will be called for. Still, you will want to prepare ceremonial blue robes ahead of time. Speaking of which... Where are your robes?” said the High Priest, which finally made me realize I hadn’t put on my blue robes yet.

“I was told it’s dangerous to wear them outside of the temple, so I was planning to put them on once I got here.”

“Dangerous?”

“Criminals might think I’m the child of a noble and kidnap me. One second, please.” I stuck my hands into the basket by Lutz’s feet and dug out the blue robes and sash.

“Myne? What’re you...”

“Putting on the robes.” I pulled the blue robes over my head like always, taking care to not catch them on my hair stick. When my head popped out of the top, I found myself looking directly into Fran’s eyes.

He had started kneeling, and he looked troubled since his raised hands had nowhere to go.

“What’s wrong, Fran?”

“...Allow me to help you dress.”

“Um, well then... Can you put on my sash for me?” It was probably best to not tell him that I could do it myself. I held up my arms and allowed Fran to tie my sash, whereupon I made eye contact with the High Priest, who was cradling his head.

“Myne, change clothes in your own room. That was shameful.” The topic had shifted to rooms at an unexpected point. Since I would be changing every day, I had been hoping to ask to borrow a changing room or a closet or something.

“...Will you be giving me my own quarters?”

“No, I misspoke. I convinced the High Bishop to allow you to commute from home by telling him that it was better than giving you a home in the Noble’s Quarter. There will be no going back on that decision.” The only one here who would support something as convenient as me commuting was the High Priest. It seemed that he was breaking his back for me in various ways without me realizing it.

“Um, High Priest. Do you have any homes not in the Noble’s Quarter?” That question seemed to be unexpected for him. He furrowed his brows and narrowed his eyes, making it clear that he couldn’t understand my proposition. I hurriedly elaborated to clear his suspicions.

“As you know, I am not a noble despite being given blue robes. I therefore do not pretend to want a room in the Noble’s Quarter. I would just like a room to change clothes and store some belongings, one that visitors can be directed to. Do you have a closet or something like that I can borrow?”

“You would invite visitors to a closet?! Do you have no grasp of how rude that would be?” The High Priest raised his voice with his eyes open wide. That definitely would be rude to visitors, but it wouldn’t be that much different from the current situation, in my opinion.

“Forgive my impudence, but at the moment I do not even have a closet. Lutz is being made to wait at the gate for me. Is making a visitor wait at the gate not rude in itself?”

“It is better than guiding a visitor of a blue robe to a closet. I will... inform the guards to at least take your visitors to a waiting room.” According to the High Priest (as he explained while rubbing his temples), guests of blue priests and shrine maidens were treated entirely differently from commoners with unknown reasons for visiting. It was clear that the High Priest was considering me an apprentice blue shrine maiden in full, not a pauper girl in rich

clothing.

“High Priest, what about giving Sister Myne the orphanage director’s chambers? They are far from the Noble’s Quarter, and given that a blue shrine maiden was already using them years prior, it will not injure a guest’s honor to be invited there,” said Arno, which sent a stir through the gray priests present. The High Priest didn’t seem bothered, however, and nodded after some thought.

“Very well. I will give Myne the orphanage director’s chambers. Henceforth you will change clothes and meet visitors there. Once your work for the morning is done, Fran will guide you there.”

“This is an extraordinarily rude request, but may I be taken to the chambers first? Lutz is here to teach Fran about how to manage my health, so I need a place for them to talk.

“The director’s chambers have been long unused, so they are not well-kept enough to be used immediately. You will be working here, so they can talk here as well. Fran, use the table over there.”

“Understood.” Fran and Lutz moved to the table the High Priest directed them to. I watched them go and saw Gil following them despite having nothing to do there.

“High Priest, I would like to go to the chambers even more so now that I know they are unkempt. I will have Gil clean them while I work here.”

“Huh? Me?” Gil pointed at himself and looked around the room, caught off guard by suddenly being given work. The other priests in the room also looked at me with surprise. I could hear them quietly whispering. “She would trust him with work?” said one, and “I heard he keeps getting sent to the repentance chamber for not cleaning the chapel.” replied another.

“...Oh? Do you not know how to clean, Gil?”

“Everyone knows how to clean!”

“Perfect. Then I will look forward to seeing just how skilled you are. Good luck.” With my encouragement, Gil left the room alongside a gray priest apprentice who the High Priest had given a key.

The door shut, and the High Priest narrowed his eyes in its direction. “Myne, was it wise to trust him?”

“If I don’t give him opportunities to work, I won’t be able to judge his worth effectively.”

By the time the apprentice came back with the key, Lutz was talking to Fran about how to manage my health, and I was helping the High Priest with his paperwork. My job today was to work my way through a ledger. He said it would be easy for me if I had merchant experience. Math was my specialty, but I didn’t want him thinking that I knew enough to handle a ledger all on my own. Especially when I barely knew anything about the temple’s inner workings.

“The math will be the same, but there’s a lot different about this ledger than what I’m used to. What does this ‘divine will’ column represent? It looks like more money is being spent here than anywhere else.”

The other expenditure columns were titled: Offerings to the gods, flowers for the gods, water for the gods, and divine compassion. There were so many strange religious terms that I didn’t feel confident going through the entire ledger.

The High Priest looked at me expressionlessly for a bit, then shook his head and pointed to one part of the ledger. “...For today, you can focus on doing the calculations.”

“Understood. Lutz, could you lend me your slate? I forgot to bring mine.”

“Uh? Oh, yeah, sure.” Lutz rifled through the basket and took out his slate. I borrowed it from him and did the math in the section that the High Priest had pointed out. He looked over shoulder curiously, but since he asked no questions, I continued my work in silence.

“...Hm, very fast. And accurate, too,” observed the High Priest, sounding impressed. But I was just used to this kind of thing since I had been going through ledgers at the gate for so long. Grinding through simple math really made me yearn for a nice electronic calculator.

As I poured my undivided attention into doing math, fourth bell eventually rang to signify noon.

“That will be all for today.” The moment the High Priest spoke, the gray priests in the room began cleaning up their work.

“Myne, leave the key to the director’s chambers with Fran so that you do not lose it. Furthermore, here is your share of the donation you brought.”

The High Priest handed me the key to the director’s chambers, one large silver, and six small silvers. It felt weird to receive a portion of my own donation, but since all donations were distributed in part to all of the blue priests, I was told to accept it anyway. (And reminded yet again that shrine maidens were often lumped in with priests, supposedly to save the effort that would be spent on continually distinguishing the two professions.)

“And incidentally, take those goods with you to your chambers.” I followed his gaze to see Benno’s gifts lined up on the shelf. They had been left there untouched, perhaps due to me collapsing. The high quality cloth, bottle of rinsham, and bundle of plant paper were all still wrapped up in cloth.

I had Lutz and Fran carry the gifts, so I only held the key to the room on my way to the orphanage director’s chambers. Fran explained the significance of my new living quarters on the way there.

“The orphanage is split into two three-story buildings on either side of the main chapel. One building is for boys and one is for girls. The director’s chambers you’ve been given are located in the boys’ building.”

“What? Weren’t these chambers last used by a blue shrine maiden? Why is it located in the boys’ building?” I asked, confused.

Fran hesitated, eyes wavering, before eventually smiling. “That is not something you need to know, Sister Myne.” Him hiding it only made me more curious, but judging by how his lips were shut in a tight line, there was little chance of him telling me.

“The orphanage is on the way from the gate to the Noble’s Quarter. That’s a good spot for you, Myne. You get to change right after getting here,” said Lutz.

“Uh huh.”

“Sister Myne, the entrance to the director’s chambers is on the opposite end from the gate, and the front end from the Noble’s Quarter. Take care not to enter through the doors the orphans use. There are different entrances for the orphanage at large and the director’s chambers. I request that you do not use the wrong one.” Fran’s warning made me put an anxious hand on my chest. The High Priest granting me the chambers at Arno’s advice despite having been so opposed to giving me a room, them being located in the boys’ building, the entrance to the chambers being separated from the orphanage entrance... Everything pointed to the chambers having an unpleasant history, so to speak.

“This way, Sister Myne.” The door to the chambers was slightly ajar, probably due to Gil cleaning. Fran opened it and there was Gil, waiting with his chest puffed out with pride.

“Heheh, how’s it look?”

The door opened into a wide hall that also served as a parlor, with a set of stairs at the end. Half of the parlor was perfectly clean, while the other half felt incomplete.

“This side of the room is really clean,” I said while going inside. But when I went to open the door on the right side of the parlor, Gil stopped me, saying he hadn’t cleaned there yet. I went for the door to the left instead, but he stopped me again. Those were the only doors I could see on the first floor.

“Gil, what in the world did you clean?”

“Your room, obviously! You think I would clean your servant rooms first? No way! I’ve cleaned the whole second floor and half of the hall leading to the stairs, don’t keep trying to go to the dirty parts.” Gil angrily climbed up the stairs. It seemed that he had prioritized me when cleaning the chambers. Maybe he was actually more sweet than I gave him credit for. I let out a small smile as I

looked at the sparkly clean staircase, polished to a shine.

I climbed the stairs and ended up in a room clearly meant for the nobility. It was incredibly large and still had several pieces of furniture within it. There was an ornately decorated table with four chairs in the center of the room. There was a closet with shelves nearby, and an impressive trunk carved skillfully out of wood. The corner of the room had a large bed, although one without cushions. Judging by the fact that the furniture was placed in a roughly similar fashion to the High Priest's room, and that the furniture was expensive and skillfully made, it was easy to tell that the room's prior resident had been a noble daughter.

"Why did nobody take the furniture? It all seems fairly expensive."

"That is because the previous owner was who she was."

"The previous owner being... Ah, nevermind. I won't ask. I will merely be grateful to use the furniture for myself." I had no intention of wasting money by buying replacement furniture, so it was better to not ask questions I didn't need to know the answer to. I put Benno's gifts on the neatly cleaned shelves and my clothes in the closet.

"Thank you, Gil. The room is very clean."

"Huh?! Uh, yeah. I cleaned it, 'course it's clean." Gil was puffing out his chest proudly again, but his expression was thoroughly embarrassed. He wouldn't make eye contact with me, but he was grinning like he had never been complimented in his life before. When he glanced my way, his eyes were practically begging for more praise.

It was easy to tell that he wasn't used to being complimented for his efforts. The fact he was enough of a troublemaker to be assigned to me out of spite was probably an indicator that most of his time was spent being yelled at, not complimented. Luckily, the core principle of discipline was praising someone a lot when they did good.

"Gil, crouch a little so I can praise you more."

"Huh? Like this?" Gil got down on one knee. Remembering that he had been raised to instantly make such postures in times of prayer and worship, I reached out for Gil's dirty blond hair, which was now lower than my own head. He followed my hand with dubious eyes, having no idea what I was planning to do.

"There there, good boy. You did a very good job."

Lutz always got embarrassed and told me to stop treating him like a kid when I patted his head, but Gil's eyes widened, then his face scrunched up like he was holding back tears. He immediately lowered his face to the floor, which made me pull my hand back reflexively, but then he whispered "Keep going..." quietly at me.

"It's really, really clean. You did a good job all on your own." Gil's ears went bright red as he quietly let me pat his head. I was hit with

the urge to crouch and look at his face, but I held it back since I could imagine him yelling at me angrily not to look.

I made a firm mental note that what Gil deserved and needed more than the divine gifts was praise and gratitude.

First Time Outside

“This place is pretty huge, huh?” Lutz began exploring the director’s chambers with an excited expression. The second floor had the main bedroom, rooms for female attendants who took direct care of their master, and a storage room.

Gil didn’t want me to enter the rooms since they weren’t cleaned, but I nonetheless explored the first floor too. The door to the immediate right after entering the chambers had four rooms for attendants and a storage room. The left door led to a dining area with a kitchen large enough for multiple chefs to work at once, plus stairs to an underground storage area.

“Once the kitchen is cleaned, it will allow you to offer tea to visitors. It would be wise to assemble a tea set, Sister Myne,” said Fran with satisfaction as he looked over the kitchen, but my eyes were locked on something else. In the corner of the kitchen was something that strongly resembled the oven in the guildmaster’s home.

“Wait, is that an oven?”

“Is it not normal for ovens to be in kitchens?” asked Fran, confused. The only kitchens in the temple were those assigned to blue-robed nobles, which made ovens a normal fact of life for those who grew up here, but they were still rare to me and Lutz. Rare, and desired.

“Lutz! There’s an oven here! We have to tell Benno about this!”

“Oooh!” Lutz, who was in the process of working with Benno and Mark to open the Italian restaurant, looked around the noble kitchen with sparkling eyes.

“So, Fran. Would it be acceptable for me to bring chefs here after the kitchen is cleaned?”

“Yes. It is normal for blue apprentice shrine maidens to bring chefs and other servants to their quarters.”

As I began planning to train chefs here while simultaneously giving food to my attendants and those in the orphanage, Fran brought me back down to reality.

“As you have not brought a chef with you today, Sister Myne, how will you choose to have lunch?” The temple operated on a system where blue priests brought chefs with them to make their food, the leftovers of which trickled down the organization. I couldn’t have lunch through conventional means without a chef.

“I think eating out will be our best option. Please get changed, you two.”

“Changed?”

I returned to the second floor and took out some bundles from the basket Lutz brought. I placed them on the table and pushed them toward my two attendants.

“This isn’t a gift from the divine or anything. This is a gift from me, to reward you two for working so hard. You don’t need to share these with anyone. They’re yours.”

“Thank you, Sister Myne.”

“Wait, wha? Really?”

Fran and Gil opened the bundles, their expressions filled with anxiety, happiness, and anticipation. For a moment, I thought they looked entirely like children opening gifts for the first time — then I realized that this really *was* their first time. In a place of equality like the temple, it was hard to imagine many gifts being given or received. Although my family was poor, I still received gifts from my parents on some occasions, like my baptism or when I first went to the forest. Fran and Gil had nothing like that in their lives.

“...Hey. These are clothes, yeah?”

“Mhm. Change into them so we can go outside.”

“Really?! I’ve always wanted to go outside. Gimme a sec, I’ll go get changed.” Gil smiled the brightest smile I had ever seen him make as he hugged the bundle of clothes to his chest. He dashed down the steps, going down multiple at a time. He was so obviously happy that I felt happy too just for giving him the gift.

As I smiled I turned to look at Fran, who hadn’t said a single word. He was quietly looking at his clothes spread on the table, tracing his fingers along the green embroidery with a sense of awe. My heart was tickled at the sight of him embracing his happiness at his own pace.

“Fran, would you change into the clothes, so I can see you in them?”

“A-As you wish.” Fran’s cheeks flushed slightly with embarrassment as he quickly walked down the stairs, having noticed that I was looking at him. It was so rare to see the calm and collected Fran get flustered that Lutz and I laughed a little together.

“Nice to see that they liked the clothes.”

“Mhm.”

Lutz glanced at the stairs, then lowered his voice. “...But what was that about Gil looking forward to leaving the temple? This place is pretty weird, huh?”

“It is. But from their perspective, we’re the weird ones.” I took off my blue robes, folded them, and put them in the closet so that I could

go outside. A hanger would be nice to keep them from getting wrinkled from the folds. *I'll ask Benno to get some made*, I thought while picking up some of the donation money to fund our excursion.

I left the temple, with my two attendants looking afraid to pass through the temple gates and enter the lower city.

"Fran, you don't need to worry so much. It'll be fine."

As it was his first time wearing anything other than his gray priest robes, Fran kept messing with his sleeves and collar, but the dark-brown clothes matched his calm demeanor perfectly. Gil's light-green clothes radiated energy and looked completely natural on him as he ran all over the place in excitement.

"Woooh, we're outside! This is just, man, now I'm really glad I became an attendant!"

"In that case, you may express your newfound devotion by speaking more politely. You will embarrass Sister Myne at this rate."

"...Uuuh, sure, eventually." He spun his head around to look at everything, racing toward whatever caught his interest. It was impossible for me to keep up with him while also maintaining my slow pace. In the end, Fran picked me up and carried me while Lutz held Gil back from running off on his own.

"It feels strange to walk outside the temple."

"...Well, this is my world. You might want to loosen up a bit when you're out here, Fran. You'll stand out if you're too polite."

"It is surprisingly difficult to change the way one speaks."

Lutz guided us to an eatery near the central plaza. It was a relatively expensive place, and apparently one that merchants favored. Rather than using large communal tables, it had several small tables for small parties, which was rare. I could see several groups of people having what looked like business discussions.

Lutz had been to the eatery before, so he ordered his recommended food for us. Cheese and sausages boiled in salt were stacked high on plates with baskets of thinly sliced bread nearby. We each got our own bowl of vegetable soup, too.

"Time to eat."

"Huh? That's it?" When Lutz and I reached out for the bread, Gil gave us a sharp rebuke. We froze with our arms outstretched and looked at each other.

"Did we forget something?"

"You gotta pray before you eat, don'tcha? Take a listen. O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies who doth grace us with thousands upon thousands of lives to consume, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, I offer thanks and prayers to thee, and do take part in the meal so graciously provided."

Judging by how Gil fluidly chanted it with his arms crossed in

front of his chest, I could tell that the prayer was something those living in the temple always said before eating.

“...I dunno. Never heard that prayer before in my life.”

“I guess I’m going to have to memorize that.”

With Gil and Fran’s guidance, I tried repeating the prayer before eating. There was no way I’d be remembering it any time soon, though. I would need to write it in on my notepad when I got the chance.

I shook off those thoughts and started eating with Lutz, but Fran and Gil made no move to join us. They just sat still in front of their food.

“Wha? Aren’t you going to eat? Are you not hungry?” I asked out of curiosity, and in reply Fran slowly shook his head.

“...As we are attendants, we cannot eat until you are finished, Sister Myne.”

“But the food will be cold by then.” It looked like Gil wanted to dive in, but was holding himself back due to Fran’s presence. He was fidgeting so much he looked like a wind-up toy stuck in place.

“Okay, this is an order. Eat your food while it’s hot and delicious.” They had to obey my orders, and so Fran reached for some bread with a reluctant expression on his face. Seeing that, Gil happily did the same.

Fran ate with the kind of graceful posture one didn’t see much in the lower city. Gil, having been raised in the orphanage as well, also ate relatively politely. Lutz was much more aggressive with his food, as he was used to stuffing his cheeks while fighting with his brothers all the time. Perhaps this was the result of an environment where food was shared equally, and there was no fighting or stealing from each other.

“You both have really nice manners. Were you taught them?”

“The orphanage cannot expose the blue priests to unsightly or shamefully incompetent servants, and thus we are taught by our elders how to eat, walk, and so on.”

“Yup, yup. The thing I hate the most is the purification we gotta do before leaving the orphanage. It’s not too bad right now, but man, it sucks in the winter. It’s like they’re tryna kill us.”

“Thankfully, those who become attendants are given warm water instead of cold.”

In my opinion, any institution that was concerned about appearances more than anything else was probably a bad place to be. But thanks to their efforts, Gil both looked clean and had good table manners. I continued eating while asking about how differently attendants were treated from orphans, when suddenly I noticed Fran’s eyebrows furrowing a bit. Fran was used to eating the food of nobles,

leftovers or not, and it seemed the food served here wasn't to his taste. He was scrunching up his face just a tiny bit as he ate.

"Fran, I guess this food is a lot different from what you're used to?" I smiled and tapped my brow to indicate that I noticed his expression, which made Fran cover his eyebrows with a hand while forcing a smile.

"Very much so. My usual meals are much different from this. However, the soup being warm makes it much more delicious." The food he had been getting from his noble master was of the highest quality, but due to it always being leftovers, he had never eaten freshly cooked, warm food before.

"I don't care about the taste as long as my stomach's full. We get waaay less divine gifts now 'cause all those blue priests left, but a bunch of gray priests got sent back to the orphanage, so yeah." Gil had eaten his fill of the food, but in the end he ate way less than Lutz despite being around the same age as him. It was possible that his stomach had shrunk from hunger after he was forced to eat less.

"In that case, I think I'll buy some extra food for your dinner, and to give to the orphanage. Me going home means you won't get much for dinner otherwise, right?"

"Really?! All right! Blessed be the gods!" It had been so long since Gil had been able to eat his fill of food that he stood up in excitement and struck the praying pose in the middle of the eatery. The once-bustling restaurant fell silent and all eyes fell on our table.

"H-Hold up! Don't pray out here!" Lutz hurriedly dragged Gil out of the eatery. I apologized to the store owner for the commotion and, after adding a little to the bill to compensate, fled from the premises.

"Please leave the praying to the temple. Nobody prays out here. Okay? Just like Lutz and I don't know anything about the temple, you and Fran don't know anything about the lower city," I warned Gil with a sigh and his shoulders slumped with visible sadness.

"...My bad. Sorry."

"Just be more careful from now on and it'll be fine."

"I'm not talking about now! What I'm saying is... sorry for calling you stupid and all that." It seemed he regretted how he had acted at the temple.

Lutz laughed and patted Gil's back. "We're both ignorant in our own ways. If Myne starts acting weird, tell her what she's messing up. Just like the stuff about praying before she eats. I'll keep an eye on you so you don't do weird stuff either."

"Gil, some stands over there sell food for travelers. It'll be a good place to buy dinner and a little food for the orphanage." The east gate was connected to the city road, so business was very lively with plenty of travelers. But it was also less safe due to all the outsiders. We

looked at the stands, hoping to finish our business as close to the central plaza as possible. I bought several sandwiches (thin slices of bread with ham and cheese stuck between them) and wrapped them in cloth before putting them in my tote bag.

“Fran, how many people are in the orphanage? What should I buy for them?”

“...There are around eighty to ninety people in the orphanage. Sweets are never given out, so perhaps a crate of easily distributed fruit would be ideal, or some amount of those small grain-like fruits.”

With the extra height granted to me by Fran picking me up, I surveyed the food stands from above. There were three stands nearby selling fruit. We moved between them while I checked to see which had the lowest prices.

“Oh, a divine gift,” said Gil, which made Fran instinctively turn around and me with him. There we saw him grab a fruit off a pile on a stand and start munching on it. Lutz, who had been holding his hand to stop him from running off, was frozen in place with his eyes opened wide in shock.

“W-Wait, Gil?!”

“Hey, you! Whaddaya think you’re doing?! You stealing right in front of me?!” The lady behind the stand punched Gil right in the face with a clenched fist. He looked at me, stunned, still holding a peach-esque fruit known as a prehre. I immediately had Fran set me down so I could get my money out.

“I’m sorry, miss. This boy has been a shut-in his whole life and doesn’t even know what money is. I’ll pay for the fruit, so please don’t call the guards.”

“Sorry, miss. I was supposed to stop him from doing stuff like this.”

After I paid and apologized with Lutz, the lady shook her head in exasperation. “Good grief. I don’t know where this boy’s from, but keep a closer eye on him when he’s outside.”

“I’m really sorry. Go on, Gil. You apologize too.”

“Huh? Er, s-sorry.” At my encouragement, Gil stammered out an apology with a thoroughly confused expression.

“Gil, did that prehre taste good?”

“Y-Yeah...” Gil glanced at his half-eaten prehre, looking worried. I told him he could finish it since I paid for it, then took out two pieces of cloth and used them as bags by tying together two ends.

“Miss, could you put five prehres into each of these?”

“You got it.” I bought the fruits for the orphanage at the lady’s stand, partially as an apology, then returned to the central plaza. I had Gil carry them as punishment. He wouldn’t be able to do that kind of thing again with both his hands full, probably.

“I’ll teach you how to use money once I pay you for the first time, but until then, don’t touch anything in stores or on stands.”

“...Alright.”

We walked north up the main street on our way to the temple. Fran was carrying me, and at some point Lutz looked up at me.

“Hey, Myne. Mind if I tell Master Benno about the kitchen before we go back to the temple?”

“Go ahead. He’ll need to get the ingredients and dishes ready, so the sooner he knows about it the better.”

Lutz ran up to Benno’s store, which was busily preparing for the afternoon with lunch having just finished. I had Fran set me down so I could walk leisurely after him. Gil followed behind me while still holding the bags.

“Hi, Mr. Mark.”

“Hello, Myne. The master is waiting for you.” I greeted Mark after he came out to see me, then headed to Benno’s office with my two attendants. I could see Lutz standing in front of Benno’s desk, giving his report.

The second Benno saw me, he stood up, strode in my direction, and lifted me right up. “Fantastic job, Myne! A kitchen actually used by nobles will be a perfect reference for the Italian restaurant!”

Benno rustled my hair so hard that my head bounced back in forth. He was so excited that Fran, who only knew him from the temple, took an uncomfortable step back. I knocked aside Benno’s hand and had him set me on the floor so I could sit at the table like usual.

“It’s apparently okay if I bring chefs to the chambers’ kitchen, so I came to discuss whether or not you could hire a chef soon and have him train there. The food he makes in practice will be the main source of food for my attendants, and the leftovers will be sent to the orphanage, so the ingredients won’t go to waste. It won’t hurt your wallet either if I pay for the food, so I think this is a perfect idea. Don’t you agree?”

If it was the duty of blue priests to send food to the orphanage in the form of leftovers, I had no reason not to pay for a chef. And if the orphanage was filled with hungry kids like Gil, then personally I wanted to do everything I could for them. That said, after writing some stuff on a board and falling into thought, Benno slowly shook his head.

“Nah, hold up. Paying for ingredients is part of training chefs. I’ll cover that. If I let you pay for everything, I won’t have any ground to stand on if you just take the chef for yourself.” Benno gave a very merchant-like reply and I just shrugged. If he wanted to pay, that was fine with me. Especially since I didn’t have any income at the moment

thanks to the Myne Workshop being temporarily closed for business.

“...Okay, in that case, I’ll pay for fitting the kitchen with tools while you pay for the costs of training the chefs?”

“Yeah, I want to set it up so all I’m doing is borrowing the kitchen for training. Alright. Let’s go see it.” Benno cut the conversation and stood up, apparently wanting to see the oven pretty badly. He looked just like Gil did when he learned he could go to the lower city now. Honestly, that kind of worried me.

“No, Mr. Benno, the kitchen hasn’t been cleaned yet.”

“It is as Sister Myne says. She cannot invite a visitor to her chambers while we are still unable to serve proper tea,” Fran said, and Gil nodded firmly in agreement with me. However, Benno was so excited, curious, and invested in seeing the kitchen that he ignored our objections entirely. He put a fancy coat on over his normal clothes and grinned.

“I’m not a visitor. I’m a merchant. A blue shrine maiden just got her own chambers and she wants to order some stuff to fill the place out. Nothing odd about a merchant dropping by while it’s still a little dirty. And more importantly, I want to see the kitchen before you all start messing with it.”

“Are you saying you’ll help us clean it?”

“Huh? You think I can’t clean or something? Well, you’d be wrong. The first job of an apprentice merchant is cleaning the store.”

...Well, that’s it for us. I can tell he’s not going to change his mind no matter what we say. Benno craves knowledge about nobles so much he would never miss this rare chance to learn more about them and their kitchens.

“...Fran, let’s give up. We’ll still need to order a tea set and such after we finish cleaning, so we might as well just take the opportunity to have Mr. Benno help us.”

“Sister Myne?!”

I had lost the motivation to try and think of ways to stop Benno. Every second spent having this pointless argument was a precious second I could have spent reading.

“You may not know this Fran, but ‘waste not, want not’ is a pretty common saying. If Benno wants to help, let’s not waste the opportunity. I want to use the saved time to read books.”

Fran looked at me with wide eyes, then put a hand over his mouth as if to hold back a laugh. “...Do forgive me for this, but you cannot enter the book room without me by your side. I do not believe you will have the opportunity to read books if we bring Master Benno to the temple.”

“Nooooo!”

In the end, Benno blew off everything I said to him and basically kidnapped me, lifting me up and taking me back to the temple where I couldn't even read books. Once we were there, he took off his coat and immediately began cleaning, just as he had said he would.

Everyone else followed his lead. Benno and Fran covered the higher-up places which required height and arm strength, while Gil and Lutz took care of lower, smaller places. I had neither height nor strength, so everyone treated me like dead weight.

As I wept wistful tears for the books I could be reading, I sat at the second-floor table and wrote out supply orders while Lutz informed me what we needed.

Training the Chefs

My attendants spent several days thoroughly cleaning the kitchen, making it fit to prepare food in again. At the same time, cooking utensils and the like were brought in, while the underground storage room was filled with firewood and ingredients. With that done, all we needed was for Benno to hire chefs to do work in the kitchen as part of their training.

The day I first found the kitchen, I started making natural yeast at home. I wanted to eat fluffy bread baked by pro chefs. With Benno's help, I went to a glass product store and bought glass storage containers with lids. My idea was to make the yeast with rutbers, which were in season.

I put the glass jar in boiling water to disinfect it, washed and cut the stem off rutbers, added them to a storage container with sugar and water, then shut the lid. I shook the jar several times per day, opened the lid to aerate it a few times, then waited for yeast juice to develop. It took about five days for the rutbers to completely ferment, and after some filtering, I had my yeast juice. I added water to whole wheat flour, let it rest, stirred it a bit, and done. The yeast (also known as a leavening agent) was finished.

Fluffy bread was rare even in the homes of nobles. I had eaten white bread baked from wheat in the guildmaster's home, but it wasn't the kind of fluffy bread I wanted. If I could ferment the natural yeast properly and make fluffy bread, I would have a powerful recipe on my hands. Yeast would allow me to make bread others couldn't copy, and with proper management, that would be a powerful boon in the market. *Well, not that I know if things will go exactly according to plan.*

I informed Benno that the yeast was done, and he immediately came to my chambers with the chefs. He was a young man around twenty years old, and had brought with him a girl around ten years old, clearly his apprentice. Once they learned enough about cooking, the next chefs would come to train.

"Sister Myne, this the Gilberta Company's chef, Hugo. With him is Ella, his assistant. Hugo, you will be taught the recipes of nobles here. Pay attention and learn well." Benno introduced the chefs to me, and although I wanted to greet them, I had been told to stay silent and nod. Fran would do all the talking for me. Apparently I needed to act

like a highborn noble, given my status as a blue shrine maiden.

“Hugo and Ella, then. Allow me to guide you to the kitchen,” said Fran. I had been told to leave all of the cooking instructions to Fran no matter what, so he would be reading instructions off boards I had prepared ahead of time. Gil couldn’t read yet, so we had no choice but to leave interacting with the chefs entirely to Fran.

“What you must learn first is the importance of cleanliness and sanitation. Keep your utensils and dishes clean at all times. Maintain the state the kitchen is in now. Clean your bodies before arriving here, wash your clothes without fail, and never enter the kitchen with dirty clothes or a dirty body. Understood?”

“U-Understood!”

If we beat the importance of cleanliness into them ahead of time, we wouldn’t need to repeat ourselves when they went to work at the Italian restaurant. I had no intention of letting the restaurant become one of those places that served food on hard bread and let customers drop unfinished food on the floor for dogs. Whatever the culture of this city was, I didn’t think a high-class restaurant serving noble food needed that kind of culture.

I wanted to make consommé first, but Benno wanted to eat the finished food for lunch, so that was postponed for tomorrow — it just took too long to make. Instead, since we were using an oven for the first time, I decided to go with pizza. Or to be honest, I just wanted to eat pizza.

“Today, I will instruct you on how to make a dish known as ‘pizza.’ First, light a fire in the oven.” At Fran’s instructions, the two chefs collected firewood from the storage room and lit a fire in the oven. It took time for ovens to heat up, so lighting the fire was the first step. They finished quickly, since it wasn’t really that different from lighting up a hearth.

“Wash your hands before touching the ingredients.”

With Benno and me watching while sitting at a table meant for servants, they began making the pizza dough. Fran and I had prepared the ingredients and lined them up on the kitchen counter beforehand like how food television shows often did. Hugo put my yeast, salt, sugar, and warm water into a bowl, then added flour and began mixing it thoroughly, fermenting the ingredients. In the process, he looked up and gave a little sigh.

“This really takes a lot of arm work, just like making bread does.”

“It would not be wrong to compare the two. After mixing the ingredients well, they will rise on their own. During that time, you will make the sauce and chop vegetables for use in the pizza and soup.”

He chopped up some peeled pomes, which were basically yellow

tomatoes, and cooked them over low heat while chopping up other vegetables to use as soup stock.

“Hugo, I’ll take care of the rigars.” Ella, effortlessly using a knife far too large for me, chopped up the white rigars, which were like white radishes with a garlicky taste. Meanwhile, Hugo chopped up bacon, onion-esque launeides, carrot-esque mehrens, and some mushrooms as directed. They both chopped quickly with the kind of high speed that only professionals had, fast enough to leave me impressed.

“Benno, I see that you have brought me even better chefs than I expected.”

The moment I spoke, Hugo and Ella both jerked fearfully and looked this way. The air in the room froze like ice despite the fact that I had just complimented them. The stiff look on their faces made it clear I had misspoken somehow. I looked at Benno for help, and he gave me a gentle smile.

“Your praise is unexpected but greatly appreciated. Chefs, you have been complimented.” The icy atmosphere melted thanks to Benno’s backup. Hugo and Ella’s expressions loosened up with relief, and after saying “We are honored to receive your praise,” they resumed chopping vegetables with serious looks in their eyes.

Benno glared at me and subtly made a gesture that could be translated as *“Keep your mouth shut,”* a proposition to which I gave a firm nod. ...*Sorry. I didn’t expect a compliment to make them freeze up like that.*

After finishing with the vegetables, Hugo prepared the chicken meat. He cut the breast meat into thin slices, then sprinkled salt and cooking wine onto it. Ella prepared tasty herbs that would go well with the meat.

“You will now prepare the soup.” The recipe I wrote was for a salty vegetable soup with flavorful broth brought about by slicing and boiling sausages. I wanted this world to learn that vegetables could add flavor to soup too if cooked properly.

“Continue using the broth to cook the ingredients. Do not boil the vegetables and then throw away the water.”

“No throwing away the water at all?” Fran’s instructions left both of the chefs confused. But as they could not defy a noble, they continued cooking with confused grimaces on their faces. They looked just like Mom had in the past when she watched me making soup.

“Ella, please remove the surface foam. Hugo, the pome sauce has finished cooking. Please mix it thoroughly with the rigars and the oil. That will complete the sauce. Oh, and it seems the dough is about ready.”

With instruction after instruction coming his way, Hugo deflated

the swollen pizza dough, cut it in half, and started stretching it out.

“Spread the finished pome sauce on top of the widely stretched-out dough, then add the cut vegetables on top.”

As Fran instructed, Hugo spread the pome sauce on the dough, then added bacon, mehrens, and mushrooms. On the other piece of spread-out dough, he also spread out pome sauce, then added the breast meat, mehrens, and herbs on top. With that done, he covered both with plenty of cheese and then put them into the oven.

I noticed that Ella was watching him carefully, almost as if she was spying on the cooking process. Her eyes were filled with the same ambition and determination that Tuuli had when discussing sewing with Corinna, and that Leise had when discovering a new recipe. I cheered silently in support of her.

If we had the time, I would have liked to make mayonnaise and use it to make potato salad using potatoffels, but this was their first time using this kitchen, and they were under the intense pressure of cooking while a noble (as far as they knew) watched them. It was likely that things wouldn't go according to plan. I stealthily signaled to Fran to introduce fewer recipes than planned and he gave a slight nod.

“The soup appears to be well-cooked, so please taste-test it and adjust the salt to taste.” At Fran's encouragement, Hugo poured some soup into a small bowl and timidly took a sip. The moment it entered his mouth, he opened his eyes wide and froze in place. It took him a long time to swallow it down, probably due to rolling it over his tongue to experience its taste in full.

“...Is this, real?” he whispered before pouring more and taking another mouthful. Then another. *At this rate we're going to run out of soup*, I thought right before Ella slapped Hugo on the back.

“Hugo, you're eating too much! Does it need more salt or not?”

“Woah...?! Ah, r-right.” Hugo looked between the bowl and the pot of soup, then shut his eyes tightly. He had probably never tasted anything like the soup before. It would probably be difficult to judge if it was salty enough, or if it needed anything added.

“Just a bit more. I need just a little more.” Hugo pinched some salt with trembling hands, stirred it into the soup, and taste-tested it once more. “Alright.”



“Let me taste it too.” Ella held up a bowl and asked to taste the soup like a dog waiting on a treat, which looked so funny I had to put a hand on my mouth and stifle a laugh. No doubt the air would freeze over again if I laughed here.

Ella took a sip of the soup given to her in one go, and immediately her face lit up. “Woah! What’s going on?! This tastes so good! This is the vegetables, right? There’s sweetness, and the taste of the sausage is soaked into the soup too... I can’t believe a little salted soup can taste this good!”

“Calm down, Ella.” Hugo held down Ella’s shoulders to stop her from jumping with excitement as she raved about the soup at a breathless pace. He glanced at me, then tried to warn her off with a hard look, but she was so excited by the new flavor that she didn’t pick up on it.

“How could I be calm?! This is a huge discovery! A revolution!”

“I’m begging you, calm down. We’re in front of a noble.”

“...Ah...” Ella paled and looked at me. I hadn’t said anything, but the air was frozen again. I wanted to say “*I appreciate the enthusiasm for your work. Keep it up,*” but I wasn’t sure what a proper noble should do in this situation. Fran walked up to me, so I whispered to him “Could you tell them that I am glad to have chefs passionate about their work here, and that I look forward to the meals they will cook for me?”

“Understood. Sister Myne, Master Benno, the food will be ready soon. Please wait in the master bedroom, if you would,” said Fran while elegantly gesturing toward the exit.

Gil, who was standing by the door, quickly opened it. I slumped over sadly on the inside, having been basically forced out of the room. After getting off my chair, Benno held out a hand to escort me.

Fran needed to stay in the kitchen to give instructions, so it fell upon Gil to follow me to my room. He shut the door and walked in behind me. I nearly giggled after seeing his proud expression, which was basically saying “*See, I can do my job!*”

My room’s table was adorned with flowers in vases as I had instructed, along with place mats, cutlery, and juice. Gil had prepared all of this while we were in the kitchen watching the chefs.

“Thank you, Gil,” I said. In response, Gil got on one knee with a “heh.” That was the posture he made when he wanted to be praised, a silent understanding that had formed over the past few days.

“You did a good job. You worked very hard,” I said while patting his head, which made him smile with satisfaction. His hair was silky and clean, since I had used rinsham on him yesterday to prepare for the chefs’ arrival. It felt very nice to the touch.

I sat at the table, had a drink, and let out a sigh. Now that I was surrounded by people who knew the real me, I could visibly slump my shoulders and start complaining. “Being a noble lady is so tiring. I want to talk! Let me cook with them next time.”

“Give it up. To them, this is their opportunity to learn about cooking noble food in a noble kitchen with a noble watching. It’s training for them, just like it’s training for you on how to act like a noble. Don’t let your guard down in the temple, you idiot.”

“Ngh... I’ll do my best.” I took deep breaths and straightened my back. Right as I put myself back in a highborn mood, I heard the door to the downstairs kitchen opening. Fran arrived with the food and Gil immediately moved to the corner of the room.

“Fran, I would like to have rutbers for desert.”

I had brought the sugar in the kitchen from my own home, as Benno still hadn’t gotten his hands on sugar. I was going to need to hold off on sweets until he secured an avenue for buying it. That was fine for now, since summer fruit tasted fairly sweet, but I wanted to have a stable source of sugar by the time the restaurant was established.

Fran placed the two different kinds of pizzas on the table with the soup. They looked like fine pizzas; at worst, they were a little burnt. The breading was brown with cooked marks, and steam wafted off the cooked cheese to fill the room with a nice smell. The bacon was still quietly popping a little, and I could see fat dripping off the chicken meat. Both of the pizzas looked delicious. Even Benno looked at them with gleaming eyes, his anticipation more than evident.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies who doth grace us with thousands upon thousands of lives to consume, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, I offer thanks and prayers to thee, and do take part in the meal so graciously provided.”

I spoke the pre-meal prayer I had spent days memorizing, then Benno and I alone began eating. Everyone else would only be able to eat the leftovers, in the form of a divine gift. I would rather eat with everyone, and simply “gracing” them with the food as leftovers didn’t feel great to me, but such was the role of a blue shrine maiden. My status didn’t give me a choice in the matter.

Fran served me my food and I took a sip of the soup. It had a gentle flavor with the distinct taste of the meat and the sweetness of the vegetables, just like the soup I had at home. I preferred my soup to be a bit saltier, but that could wait for next time.

“...This is pretty good,” commented Benno.

“The vegetable flavor really comes out in the broth, doesn’t it? Leise seemed very interested in how to make soup taste like this.”

I had tried to indirectly convey that not even nobles made soup

like this, and Benno picked up on it. “Oh? Is it that rare of a technique?” He gave his soup a hard look.

“This is pizza. You may consider it a kind of advanced bread.” I picked up a slice of the pizza, chopped off the hanging strands of cheese with a fork, and demonstrated how to eat it. Benno did the same with a piece of bacon pizza.

“How does it taste?”

“...So much better than I expected that I don’t even know what to say.” I had Fran give me a slice of each pizza and Benno two slices of each, then looked up at him.

“Fran, the rest is yours, as a divine gift. Please clear the room until dessert is ready.”

“As you wish.”

By acting fast, the chefs and my attendants could eat while the food was still warm. Fran and Gil took the leftovers downstairs and I heard them shut the kitchen door behind them. It wasn’t long before Ella’s cry of glee echoed throughout the chambers. They had begun eating almost immediately, it seemed. I could faintly hear their excited chatter. Now, while they were absorbed in discussing the food, would be the best time to have a secret chat.

“Mr. Benno, do you think this pizza and soup will sell well?” I asked while nomming on the food, and Benno nodded while chewing his pizza.

“Absolutely. This is the first time I’m tasting something like this, and it tastes great. Feels like this bread is softer than the bread I ate at a noble’s dinner before.”

“That’s thanks to the yeast.”

“The what?”

“It’s a secret that will keep us on top... for example, even if the chefs we taught the recipe to were to spread the information around, they won’t be able to make the bread like this without us.” I was investing in the Italian restaurant myself as well. I had no intention of letting anyone steal my profits. “The soup itself is just utilizing the natural flavors of the vegetables, so it should be easy for others to copy if they set their minds to it. Once that starts happening, it will be a battle to see who can make better varieties of soups.”

“Oh...? We don’t have many chefs to experiment with soup varieties. How’s that gonna work?”

“We don’t need many chefs if we base our soup courses on whatever vegetables are seasonal,” I replied, and in response Benno groaned while scratching his head.

“...Gotta say, I feel like an idiot for worrying about all this on my own. Seems like you’ll be able to solve my mountain of problems in a snap.”

“Wait, what problems?”

“Nothing to talk about here. Come to my store when you can.”

After finishing our food, I rung the bell on the table. Fran and Gil entered the room with dessert in hand. They cleaned up our dishes and set down plates covered in desserts in their place.

“Fran, did the food satisfy you?” I asked, since Fran was more familiar with noble food than anyone else here. I was just making the food I wanted to eat, it had pretty much nothing to do with actual noble cooking.

“...It was very delicious. Although it was far from traditional noble recipes, I believe the food will do very well with nobles who enjoy eating new things.”

“Perfect. I can trust you, since you’re used to eating noble food.”

“The chefs seemed very interested in the food as well, and would strongly like to start making more right away, partly as practice. I believe they will be very fervent workers for us.”

Everything’s going perfectly, I thought to myself happily, but I couldn’t help but feel that I was forgetting something.

“Is something wrong, Sister Myne?”

“It feels like I’m forgetting something. Do you have any ideas as to what it might be, Fran?”

“Forgetting something, you say?”

“Yes, something about the temple, something deeply related to both of us...”

Fran and I fell deep into thought with Benno eating dessert beside us, when suddenly the door to the room was flung open.

“THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!”

...Oh, now I remember. I forgot about Delia.

Delia's Job

“Because of you, the High Bishop kicked me out of his chambers! What are you going to do about this?!” yelled Delia in fury after racing up the stairs to my room. I wasn't sure how far she had run, but her dark-red hair was a straggly mess, and she was out of breath as she stood in front of me. I had been so busy preparing the kitchen the past few days that I honestly hadn't seen her in what felt like a long time.

“This is all your fault! You made the High Priest give you a room but didn't say anything to me, so the High Bishop started calling me incompetent! Geez!”

I got the room through official channels, only wanted it for a place to change clothes, and couldn't inform Delia since I didn't know where she was. So if you asked me, her being called incompetent was no fault of mine.

“What do you even want from me, Delia?”

“Let me stay in your chambers. What else? I am your attendant, after all.”

“Know your place!” Before I could even understand what was happening, Benno slammed a fist onto her head. Delia blinked in stunned surprise and looked around the room with her hands on her head.

“Delia, you shouldn't act like that in front of a visitor. What were you expecting?”

“Wh-Why should I have to listen to a commoner like you?!”

“Seems like you still don't understand, huh?” Benno narrowed his eyes and raised a fist, leading Delia to clamp her mouth shut. Gil jerked in fear too, probably remembering the time Lutz had punched him.

Benno turned to me. “Myne, you don't need someone who can't even do their job right. Hiring someone with no motivation to work is a waste of money. Get rid of her,” he spat out. The fact that Lutz had said the same thing about Gil showed just how much Benno was influencing him.

“Fran, I don't entirely understand what position Delia is in right now. Does being kicked out of the High Bishop's chambers mean that he has cut ties with her?”

That must have been accurate, as visible tears brimmed in the

corner of Delia's eyes as she glared at me and protested with a cracked voice. "...He hasn't cut me off yet."

"I cannot say for certain that she was cut off."

"Right? Who would cut off a cute girl like me?" Delia's face lit up at Fran's words. But Fran hit Delia with the harsh reality, his expression never changing.

"Delia did not know that you had been given chambers, could not serve you because she did not know where the chambers were, and ultimately could provide no information of value whatsoever to the High Bishop. It would be unsurprising for him to be highly displeased with her," explained Fran flatly as Delia opened her eyes wide with disbelief. It seemed that he was reasonably angry at Delia for not only failing to do her job as an attendant, but attempting to cause me, her master, problems as well. His expression didn't change, but that just made his anger feel more sincere.

"If Delia was assigned to you due to her age, it is likely that the High Bishop thought that she would become fast friends with you and thus a reliable source of information. That she instead acted with blatant hostility from the start and put you on your guard immediately was no doubt an incredible disappointment for the High Bishop."

"N-No way..." Delia's expression went blank. Then, the moment after she realized that she really had been completely cut off by the High Bishop, she smiled sweetly at Fran.

"But, but! It would be ridiculous for an apprentice shrine maiden to have no girl attendants. Isn't that right?" In a move befitting her cunning personality, Delia's attempt to secure a place for herself wasn't targeted at me, her master, but instead Fran, an adult with the highest standing among my attendants.

Fran, who usually didn't let his emotions show on his face, glared at Delia with his disgust completely visible. Then, he gave a cold smile. "Sister Myne commutes to the temple from home, so she does not need an attendant to dress her or the like. The past few days have proven that your absence will cause no problems whatsoever. And in any case, if necessary, she can simply select a new attendant from the orphanage."

I had thought that I wouldn't be able to get rid of Delia since the High Bishop had assigned her to me, but the situation had changed, and apparently I could get new attendants if I wanted.

"That's a good suggestion," I observed, which made Delia bite her lip with tears starting to drip down her cheeks.

"...You're going to kick me out too?"

As I saw Delia's far-too-pretty tears, I understood without a doubt that she really had been born just to be doted on by men. The moment she was put in an inconvenient situation, she started crying and acting

sweet. She was even looking up at me at an angle with the perfect puppy dog eyes. She knew full well that girls could use their looks as a weapon even at a young age. It was honestly impressive that she was so comfortable with her own cuteness. If I had tried the same thing when I was Urano, I would have been kicked away and called gross.

To be honest, it was pretty annoying to see her act all sad and innocent after spending days being nothing but mean and insulting to me, but well, wouldn't it still be pretty cruel to kick a crying little girl out onto the street? A heavy silence fell in the room, with nobody wanting to say anything. But that only lasted a few seconds.

"Dunno why you're worrying about being kicked out when you don't even live here. You're not one of us." With a smile on his face, Gil stomped on the sympathetic atmosphere that Delia had built up.

"Wh, Wh-What?!"

"There's no room here for people who don't do their job. No food, either. The saying goes, 'he who does no work shall not eat'! Right, Sister Myne?" Gil puffed out his chest with pride, happy to have remembered what I told him.

I wasn't sure if he fully understood the significance of what he just said, but I was glad he had spoken up when no one else wanted to. I would need to give him lots of praise later. And naturally, I ignored Benno when he murmured, "Is that something a girl too weak to do any work should be saying?"

"I gave Gil a room and plenty to eat because he's working hard for me. I don't have anything to give to someone who refuses to do their job."

"Okay, I get it. I just have to do my job," said Delia before sliding onto Benno's lap and looking up at him with a smile, leaning her back against him. I blinked in confusion, not really understanding what was happening.

Benno grimaced hard and shook his hand. "Sorry, but I'm not interested in a kid like you. Get off."

"See? Your visitor is all mad because there aren't any gray shrine maidens here," proclaimed Delia with a smug, victorious smile while climbing off Benno's lap. In other words, she had just shown me the "job" that the High Bishop's shrine maiden attendants were expected to do.

I wanted to cradle my head in horror, and it seemed Benno felt the same way. He glared at Delia while rubbing his temples and making no attempt to hide his disgust. "I'm not interested in flowers to begin with. Don't mistake me for one of those nobles that come here just to admire the flowers."

"What? Wait, does that mean...?" Delia's job up until now had been to take care of the High Bishop's attendant mistresses while

refining her own beauty and skills to become his mistress in the future. That, and to show sweet smiles to his visitors.

"I don't need or want any of my attendants to do that."

"I can clean, too. One of my jobs was to take care of the High Bishop's clothes, and I even kept his room clean too," said Delia as she squeezed my sleeve tightly. I could tell that, upon realizing the skills she had honed over her whole life didn't matter to me, her self-confidence and internal sense of values had started to crumble. Her expression stiffened and she looked around the room, wearing neither a sweet smile or fake tears. But nobody offered to help cute, cute Delia.

It was probably true that Delia had been kicked out of the High Bishop's chambers, and that she was in trouble. I looked up at Fran, not sure about what I should do. He sighed reluctantly.

"I believe an evening in the repentance chamber will suffice. It is true that she must repent for attempting to sabotage you, after all."

"I'll repent. I'll do my job properly from now on. So please... don't kick me out. Don't say you don't need me," pleaded Delia desperately, visibly holding back real tears.

The intensity of her voice made me open my eyes wide. Upon looking around the room, I saw both Fran and Gil making hurt expressions as well, as if they too had been told they weren't needed in the past. Gil was a problem child who was sent to the repentance chamber regularly. Fran had suffered deeply when he thought the High Priest had abandoned him. Delia's plight had probably unearthed those memories within them.

"Fran. If Delia does her job properly, then I have no issue with her serving me."

"...If that is your wish, Sister Myne." Fran let out a small sigh of relief, then looked at Delia with a stern expression. "Delia, if you wish to work here, you must first watch your language more carefully. Sister Myne does not need a disloyal attendant who does not consider her as their master."

"Understood."

Thanks to Delia saying she'll do her job properly, I successfully avoided having to kick out a crying little girl. I put a hand on my chest and sighed in relief. "So, Delia, what exactly can you do?"

"I can keep this room clean and organized, like a blue shrine maiden's room should be. Starting here!" Delia shot a finger in the direction of what I had thought to be a closet. In reality, it was a room for using the bathroom and washing oneself. I hadn't noticed, since there was nothing in the room that would give that impression.

"Why has the bathroom not been prepared despite how many days it has been? Putting aside washing yourself, how have you been

relieving yourself?"

"Hm? There's a bathroom on the first floor, so I was going down there and cleaning it up myself."

"Come again?! Unbelievable! Geez! The first floor bathroom is for servants, and not only that, but for men as well! Have some shame!"

Hmmm, is it just me, or has her attitude not really changed that much?

Delia started listing off everything that was missing in the room, including a mirror stand and a work desk. I had been both eating and writing on the round table in the middle of the room, but apparently that was shameful for a blue shrine maiden to be doing. Although I didn't intend to take a bath here, she was quite insistent on preparing the bathroom anyway, just in case.

"Mr. Benno, can you take care of this?"

"Leave it to me. If you're missing this much stuff, yeah, you definitely need an attendant that knows how shrine maidens operate. And with someone yelling at you like that, maybe you'll learn to act a bit more like a noble girl."

"Ngh..."

After all that was done, Delia brought a jug of water to the second floor. I would need water up here to wash my face and hands, and to clean up after relieving myself. I had thought that Delia would be more like a weak princess-type since she had been aiming to be a mistress, but she had both the arm strength and stamina necessary to carry a heavy jug of water up to the second floor of my room.

"I can't believe you didn't even have water up here, geez!"

After watching Delia start doing her job while complaining basically to herself, Fran returned to the kitchen, and Gil started cleaning the first floor. I took my first bite of the dessert and talked to Benno in between mouthfuls.

"By the way, the High Priest ordered me to prepare ceremonial blue robes. What exactly is he looking for? What makes them special?"

"They are quite different from your normal robes and are designed to attract the attention of those outside the temple, much like the special outfit you wore at your baptism. There is green embroidery, your family crest, and..." Benno paused mid-sentence, then shot me a surprised look. "Wait, when're you going to a ceremony? I dunno exactly how long it takes to make a pair of ceremonial robes for nobles, but no chance is it gonna be ready by tomorrow."

I could tell by him breaking his polite tone of speech that he was anxious. Naturally, since clothes weren't made in seconds by machines here, it would take some time to prepare the robes.

"He said that I wouldn't go to many since I'm just an apprentice, but that's all I know. Maybe Fran knows when the next ceremony is.

Hey, Fra— Brhghh?!” I started to call for Fran, but Benno blocked my mouth with a hand and pointed with his eyes at the bell on the table. *Oh, right. I use the bell when calling for people.* I rung the bell and heard Fran climbing the stairs.

“What can I do for you, Sister Myne?”

“The High Priest told me to prepare ceremonial robes, but I don’t know when the next ceremony will be. Do you know, Fran?”

“If the Knight’s Order summons the help of the temple in the fall, that will be the soonest ceremony that you must attend.”

“Fall, huh? Might be rough if I’ve gotta start from scratch.”

Naturally, when it came to making a special outfit for a noble, one had to start with picking the thread with which to weave the cloth. As Benno frowned, Fran pointed at the wooden box by the wall.

“What if you used the cloth you gifted to the temple? It is very high quality, and should be usable after being dyed to the proper color.”

“Good idea. That should give us enough time. Myne doesn’t have a family crest, though. Is that gonna be a problem?”

“Does her workshop have a crest?”

“I’ll make one myself!”

As Fran and Benno discussed the design of the ceremonial robes, I began thinking up a design for my workshop’s crest. I wanted it to just be a book with a pen and ink nearby, but Fran and Benno shot that down for being too simple. I added the wood used to make the paper, flowers for hairpins, and organized it all into the shape of a proper crest. Fran was very satisfied with how elegant and feminine it was, which was fine by me.

“Sister Myne, the chefs have finished preparing dinner.”

“I see. In that case, would you check to see if they have finished cleaning up?”

On my orders, Fran checked the kitchen, talked with the chefs about tomorrow’s plans, then saw them off. The chefs leaving meant it was also time for me to leave.

“I will be going home for today. Please get changed, you two.” Gil and Fran quickly went to their individual rooms to get changed. Lutz would soon be leaving the city with Benno on business, so my attendants were getting used to accompanying me on my commutes.

I took off my blue robes to prepare for the way home. But when I started undoing my sash, Delia stepped in front of me with her head held high and her expression steaming with anger.

“Just what do you think you’re doing, Sister Myne?”

“Changing my clothes?” I let go of my sash, remembering that nobles weren’t supposed to change clothes on their own. I lifted my arms and waited for Delia to change me, only to see her eyes eyes

twist with anger.

“Changing in front of a man?! Absolutely shameless!” yelled Delia while glancing at Benno, who was still sitting at the table. I blinked in surprise, having not expected her to get so mad when I had a full set of clothes on underneath the robes.

“S-Sorry? But they’re just robes, I have clothes on under them.”

“You should only take your clothes off in front of men when attempting to seduce them! If you let every man see you change willy-nilly, your value as a woman will drop dramatically. This is really something you should know already. Geez!”

“U-Um. Okay...” *Well. I don’t think we’re on the same page here. But she’s getting mad for my sake, so it’s kind of hard to point that out.*

“Please wait in the hall, Master Benno,” said Delia. “Although she is very young, we are talking about a woman changing here. Thank you for your understanding.”

“Well, can’t argue with you there.” Benno stifled a laugh and went down the stairs. After making sure he was gone, Delia undid my sash and took off my robes. She worked quickly and efficiently, with her experience taking care of the gray shrine maidens making itself evident. She neatly folded up my blue robes and adjusted my hair stick back into place.

“Sister Myne is ready now.” Delia stuck her head out the door into the stairway and called out down the stairs. There, she froze with her eyes looking down the steps.

“What, are those clothes...?”

“A gift from Sister Myne.” Gil’s voice alone made it clear how much he wanted to brag. No doubt he was puffing out his chest with pride.

“No fair! What about me?!”

“I got this for doing my job right. You didn’t get any since you weren’t doing your job.”

“What job did you even do?!”

“I cleaned this place up. She gave me a gift since I worked hard all on my own. Heheh, pretty nice, aren’t they?”

“Whatever! I’m not jealous of them or anything!” Delia, frustrated and envious beyond belief, cut the conversation short with tears brimming in her eyes. She glared sharply at me and pointed at the stairs.

“They’re waiting for you. Maybe you should hurry and go?”

“Well, I bought some clothes for you too, but I guess you don’t want them.”

Delia looked at me, her eyes so wide it looked like her eyeballs were going to fall right out of her head. “I never said I didn’t want them. Not once.”

I took the last cloth bundle out of the closet and held it out to Delia. She reached out to touch it, then pulled her hands back with a glance in my direction.

“...You don’t mind?”

“You’ll work hard for me from now on, won’t you?”

“Well, you won’t know anything without me around. I don’t have any other choice.” With her cheeks blushing red, Delia snatched the bundle out of my hands and ran off to her room on the second floor, avoiding eye contact.

“Heeey, you coming down yet?”

“Please wait a moment, Delia is changing.” I looked at the door to Delia’s room while replying to Gil’s impatient call. She was taking a lot of time just to change clothes. No matter how long I waited, she just wasn’t coming out.

“Are you done yet, Delia?” I opened the door and saw Delia dancing around in her new clothes, singing some song with a broad smile on her face. The moment we made eye contact, she froze, then gripped her skirt tightly and began trembling. She glared at me with her face red all the way to her ears.

“D-Don’t open the door without knocking! GEEZ!”

The Reality of the Orphanage

Many days passed since Delia began doing her job. I was going to the temple every day, excluding the Earthdays that Mom, Tuuli, and everyone else in the world had off too. That was because the stuff I had ordered through Benno was arriving, I needed to write new recipes on boards for the chefs, and most importantly, I wanted as much time to read as possible.

Over the course of those days, my attendants had more or less found a fair split of the work between them. Delia took direct care of my person in the form of cleaning the bathroom, washing my expensive clothes, and keeping the second floor tidy in general. She had recently learned how to make tea from Fran, and was now making it for me in his place.

Gil mainly cleaned the first floor and the outside of the chambers, plus kept an eye on the chefs. Fran was in the process of beating proper language and manners into him. When I told him that Lutz had learned to read and do math over the winter, his competitive spirit ignited and he started saying he'd do the same thing. But he had a mountain of things he had to learn from Fran first, apparently.

Meanwhile Fran was doing everything else, including double-checking the other two's work. He went with me to the High Priest's room in the morning to do paperwork, carried our lunch's leftovers to the orphanage, informed the chefs of the afternoon menu, checked that we had the ingredients, and went to the book room with me. He managed my health, informed the relevant people when Benno came over, trained the other two attendants (as they were apprentices), and taught me how to live as a noble. Fran was doing it all. He was even reading the recipes to the chefs and double checking the storage room to make sure nothing was being taken, apparently.

I asked Fran if he had too much work, worried that he was overworking himself, but he said he had it easy since I wasn't summoning him unexpectedly in the middle of the night. Fran was just way too good for me. My gratitude for Fran and my trust in him was shooting up, as was the salary I intended to pay him. I was so grateful to the High Priest for assigning Fran to me that I didn't know how I could ever repay him.

Today was supposed to be a day off for me, but I went to the temple anyway. What I once thought was a storage room on the

second floor was being installed with a marble bathtub, which was apparently popular about nobles lately, and I needed to be there to pay. It would be a lot of work to heat up water in the kitchen and bring it all the way to the bathtub, and I was already washing myself at home with Tuuli, so I didn't need a bathtub like that. But when I said "Won't a tub do just fine?", Delia got mad at me, yelling in reply "Geez! What are you even saying?! Even the High Bishop's attendants use proper bathtubs!"

Delia wanted to use the newly installed bathtub as soon as possible. I told her she could go ahead and use it, but she once again got mad. "Do you expect me to use it without my master?! Geez!" Apparently, blue shrine maidens got wood to heat up their water, but gray shrine maidens only got cold water.

"Would you prepare it for me, then?" It seemed to me that carrying hot water up from the kitchen would make preparing the bathtub a miserable experience, but Delia did it happily. *Well, if she's happy, who am I to stop her?*

Delia washed my hair with rinsham, put on my clothes, combed my hair, and after blissfully touching my hair to confirm that it was silky smooth, excitedly went into the bath herself to use the rest of the warm water. I could imagine that she put a lot of effort into polishing her appearance.

"Sister Myne, please take care not to trust Delia too much. She still has ties to the High Bishop," warned Fran with a displeased expression as he brought me drinks during Delia's bath. I giggled a little at how serious he looked.

"I know that. She just told me happily that she got to talk to the High Bishop's attendants again." She'd puffed out her chest with pride and said "I knew he would never abandon someone as cute as me." But she would still be living in my chambers, rather than the High Bishop's. It would be better that way, both for her job and for getting information from me.

The High Priest's chambers had two adult gray priests, three adult shrine maidens, and three apprentices like Delia. In other words, the three apprentices had to take care of six people, including the High Bishop. But Delia only had to take care of me when she was here. Plus, she didn't have to do as much for me as she would for the other blue priests. And on top of that, Fran didn't trust Delia, so he gave her significantly less work than the High Bishop's gray priests did.

All in all, serving me afforded Delia much more time to hone her skills and appearance, which was a large boon to her since she hadn't given up on being a mistress when she grew up. She told me that she didn't want to serve someone as an apprentice her whole life. She wanted to be on the winning side, the side that got to use other

people. That didn't seem to be an entirely healthy mindset to me, but I appreciated how much effort she put into accomplishing her dreams.

"Delia might still be tied to the High Bishop, but if she takes her job seriously, that's fine with me. I'll be careful about what things I tell her. Though I'm not completely sure what information I should be hiding from her, to be honest."

"Sister Myne, that is hardly reassuring." Fran sighed and said not to tell her much about Lutz or my family, explaining that they were my biggest weakness.

Once Delia got out of the bath, it was time for lunch. Today's lunch was fluffy bread rolls, vegetable and bacon consommé soup, and herb roasted chicken. Gil and Delia took turns serving each meal, while the one not serving ate lunch at the same time as me. Fran was excluded from being a server as he was going to the orphanage to deliver the divine gifts, and because he had to stay with me in the book room.

"Sister Myne. I will be taking the divine gifts to the orphanage."

"Yes, thank you."

The wagon waiting outside of my chambers had the still-warm soup, bread, and meat leftovers stacked on it. Delia and Gil yet lacked the strength to push the heavy wagon, which meant Fran was the only one who could do it.

"Huh? Is Fran already gone?" After Fran left, Gil came out of the kitchen carrying a basket filled with some bread. He checked outside, saw that the wagon was gone, and looked down at his basket.

"What's wrong, Gil?"

"Delia said this was way too much bread to eat, so I thought maybe I could catch Fran before he left. No point saving them for dinner, either, 'cause the chefs are saying they're baking more bread later."

"There haven't been many divine gifts for the orphanage lately, correct? I think it would be better to carry the bread to them than to throw it away."

"Yeah, sounds good." Gil laughed and readjusted his grip on the basket. No doubt those in the orphanage would be glad to get even just four extra rolls of bread.

"Actually, Gil. Would it be acceptable for me to go with you? I would like to see what the orphanage is like for myself at least once." My chambers had a different entrance, but as it was still a part of the orphanage, I would have expected for me to see some of the children by now. And yet, I hadn't seen a single one. I had seen apprentices like Delia and Gil cleaning the temple, washing clothes by the well, taking care of animals, and so on, but I hadn't seen any of the pre-baptism orphans.

“Alright, I’ll take you there. I know a shortcut. Follow me.” Gil sounded proud as he headed to the gate, like someone about to share a secret. A shortcut would be perfect for someone without stamina like me.

He spun around the building, then went down the stairs in front of the chapel. The summer sun made the white marble stairs gleam brightly. I normally only walked in the morning or in the evening when it was cool out, but noon was hot as you would expect in the summer.

“The orphanage’s dining room is in the girls’ building. The girls’ building has pre-baptism kids, gray shrine maidens that aren’t attendants, and apprentices. Boys go to the boys’ building after being baptized. When giving divine gifts, it makes more sense for working boys to go to the girls’ building than for girls and kids to go the boys’ building, yeah?”

I followed Gil down the steps while listening to his explanation, and eventually we came across a somewhat hidden entrance to the orphanage built into the side of the staircase. There was a bar lock on the outside of the door, which made it seem like it was there to keep the people inside from getting out, rather than to keep outsiders from getting in.

“Most people don’t know this door opens. From the inside it just looks like part of the wall, and nobody ever opens it.”

“How do you know about it, then?”

“When I was little, it opened just once, in the middle of the night. Someone gestured at us, then a gray shrine maiden went running off. It closed real soon, but ever since then, I started to really want to go outside. I thought maybe somebody would be waiting for me.”

Gil grinned nostalgically and set the bread basket on the ground to take off the bar. He then pulled on the door hard, using all his weight since the hinges were rusted and the door just wouldn’t move.

When it finally burst open, a wave of heat and an awful smell came rushing out, making me reflexively grab my nose. Gil did the same with a grunt. It was a smell too awful to bear even for someone used to the smells of a city.

With the door open and letting light in, we could clearly see the inside of the room. Atop a layer of moldy hay covered in urine and fecal matter were several naked young toddlers, sprawled on the floor with lifeless expressions on their faces. It didn’t seem to have any windows, so even with the bright summer light streaming inside, it was still dark.

“...Divine gifts?” Upon noticing the smell of the gifts, some of the toddlers let out cracked voices and came crawling toward us with gleaming eyes. Black stuff was stuck to the bare skin that clung tightly

to their bones. They looked like starving African refugee children that I had only ever seen in photos before, and the sight of them crawling toward me made me feel more horror than pity. I felt an indescribable sense of fear and froze in place, my teeth chattering.

“...N, No...” I squeaked out fearfully, which seemed to knock Gil back to his senses. He hurriedly shut the door and put the bar back on the door. We heard the sounds of their fists hitting the door, but they were weak strikes without much strength to them. Far from enough strength to break the door open.

As the relief of having escaped the terror mixed with the disgusted horror of what I had seen in the orphanage, and I collapsed on the floor, my head going completely blank.

When I came to, I was in my own room. I was resting on something hard, and a touch revealed that I wasn't on a cotton-stuffed mattress that nobles used, or a hay-stuffed mattress that I used at home. I was resting on the plain board that had been left in the abandoned director's chambers. I looked to my side and saw that Gil was sitting on top of a chair, hugging his knees as if trying to shrink into as small of a ball as possible.

“...Gil?”

“You're awake? Thank the gods. I'm so sorry, I...” Gil looked at me with tearful eyes, but before he could finish his sentence, Delia started yelling from the other side of the bed.

“What were you thinking, taking Sister Myne to the girls' building?! And the back entrance at that!”

“It's not my fault! I didn't know things were like that there now!”

Gil's words stirred my memories of what I had seen in the orphanage. The closed room. The hay covered in urine and fecal matter. The starved, bony toddlers without a scrap of clothing on. That was simply not a place for raising children. Given the lack of airflow, it was worse than even an unkempt farm stable.

The second the memories came back to me, goosebumps covered my skin and I felt the contents of my stomach lurching over. I jumped up and swallowed hard to keep from throwing up on the spot. Fran, seeing me covering my mouth to hold back the vomit, pushed his way past Gil to be by my side.

“Forgive me, Sister Myne. I apologize from the bottom of my heart for allowing you to see that embarrassing sight. Please forget everything you saw.” Fran calling the horrible state of the orphanage “embarrassing” and telling me to “forget” it threw me off, so I looked at Gil.

“That was really the orphanage? It wasn't anything like what you told me.”

“I moved to the boy's building after being baptized, so I had no

idea what was going on in the girls' building... That place wasn't like that at all when I was there, Sister Myne." Gil lowered his eyes and spoke in a weak voice.

Delia glared at him and let out a "hmpf," then explained. "It's because when the blue priests left, a lot of gray shrine maidens left the temple too. Little kids started dying all the time without people to take care of them. I just sat down there waiting for my baptism, so I could move up to the first floor. But well... I only know what it was like there a year ago. It must be a lot worse now. I don't even want to think about it." Delia too lowered her eyes, trembling slightly.

Gil was ten years old, so he was baptized three entire years ago. Delia was eight, and apparently things were pretty awful even when she was baptized a year ago. According to her, gray shrine maidens started leaving one after another a year and a half ago, and without anyone to take care of them, the orphan children were abandoned and only brought food twice a day at best.

"When I was brought out for my baptism, I was told by a gray shrine maiden that I was too dirty to be presented to the blue priests. She scrubbed me clean so hard my entire body hurt. But the moment all the filth was off me, she started talking about how cute I was and how I'd grow up to be beautiful. Right after my baptism, I was taken to the High Bishop. There were three kids with me. I got to be an apprentice attendant, but the other kids didn't get picked and were sent back to the orphanage." Upon learning why Delia was so attached to her own cuteness and why she avoided the orphanage so much, I felt my heart get even heavier.

"Sister Myne," interjected Gil. "Please save them. I'm begging you, please."

"Stop, Gil. Sister Myne, you must not get involved with these matters." Fran rejected Gil's pleas with a harsh look on his face. I honestly didn't want to actively get involved with the orphanage since just remembering the orphans made me sick, but I hadn't expected Fran to reject the idea so firmly when he himself was from the orphanage.

"Why not?!" yelled Gil, as if speaking in my place, and Fran gave a firm reply.

"It's too dangerous. Sister Myne has a tendency to grow extremely protective of those close to her, of her allies. As seen when she used her mana on the High Bishop to protect her family. If she gets involved with the orphanage, and considers herself their ally, then she might stand in opposition to the blue priests in order to protect the orphans. It would be wise to minimize the chance of her subconsciously unleashing her mana."

With Gil pleading for my help and Fran opposing the idea, I

reflexively turned to Delia to hear what her thoughts were.

“...If they can be saved, I think you should. But I don’t want to get involved and I don’t want to remember them. I want to forget it all,” said Delia with a stiff expression before turning her head away from me.

Gil scrunched his face up, hurt to learn that nobody was on his side. He grit his teeth and looked at me with wavering eyes before slowly getting on his knees and crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Sister Myne, please. Save them.”

I tightened my lips at Gil’s wholehearted plea. In general, I wanted to help the suffering when I could. For example, if someone asked me to do something specific in concrete terms to help, and it was within my power to do so, I would. But if someone asked me to spend the rest of my life helping, or if someone asked me to help without explaining how, I would be at a loss.

In my Urano days I had participated in charity drives sometimes, but generally only did community service when my college demanded it since I was only interested in books. Furthermore, ever since becoming Myne, I was constantly relying on the help of others due to my sickness and weakness. I could offer advice based on my life experience on Earth, but anything that required moving would have to be done by other people. Ultimately, it was hard to think that I would be much help to the orphanage myself.

“Right now, I like doing my job because you praise me for it, Sister Myne, and I like working hard because I get paid more. The food’s good, I get to eat as much as I want, and I can sleep with my legs stretched out in my own room. My life’s great now. But they’re... they’re stuck down there, like... like that...”

“I’m sorry, Gil. There’s almost nothing I can do for them. I’m not a true noble, and I don’t think I can ignore Fran’s advice so lightly.”

Gil looked up, his expression hurt. But I was just a commoner who had narrowly earned the right to wear blue robes through leveraging my mana and money in times of trouble. I couldn’t promise to save the orphanage so easily when I knew so little, and I couldn’t bear the responsibility of looking after the orphanages from here on out.

“But at the very least, I will ask the High Priest about this. If there’s any idle gray priests, I’ll ask if they can work in the orphanage, or maybe I’ll see if there’s a bit more room in the budget for food... I’ll see if there’s anything the High Priest can do to make the orphanage’s situation better.”

“Thank you, Sister Myne.”

The High Priest was handling the budget and inner workings of the entire temple himself. He should be able to send more money to the orphanage or search for caretakers if asked to. I sighed in relief,

thinking he might just solve everything, but Fran lowered his eyes and shook his head.

“There is no need for you to get involved, Sister Myne.”

“I am just asking the High Priest for help, nothing more. Please arrange a meeting with him.” If the High Priest couldn’t do anything, I surely couldn’t, and he might be able to give me advice on what to do going forward. At the very least, it would be a lot better than worrying on my own without even knowing what options are available to me.

I repeated my request to Fran, and he hesitantly agreed to arrange a meeting.

Discussion With the High Priest and My Resolve

I was given permission to meet the High Priest at fifth bell, so I went to his room with Fran when the time came. The High Priest, who had apparently heard the details from Fran, spoke as soon as he saw my face.

“I reject your proposition. There is no reason to divert more funds or manpower to the orphanage.” Not only did he reject my request without even letting me speak, he did so in a way I couldn’t understand. I hadn’t expected in the least that he would say that there was “no reason” to help the orphanage, despite knowing how horrible the situation was there.

“What do you mean, no reason? As we speak, small children are starving to death. That is simply no environment a child should be in, and...” Maybe he just didn’t know how bad things really were. I nervously tried to explain to the High Priest what I had seen. But he raised a hand and interrupted my explanation.

“Putting aside our working priests and apprentices, we do not have the money to spend on pre-baptism orphans. You may not know this since you were raised by your parents, but pre-baptism children are not recognized as humans by the temple. They will be treated as humans only after being baptized.”

I had expected something like that to be the case, since people couldn’t enter the temple or be given jobs until they were baptized. But still, even without recognizing them as human, it wasn’t right to treat children like that.

“...Are you saying that you don’t care if the children die?”

“Yes, because their deaths would be a part of the gods’ plan for us. To put it in harsh terms, the temple will be better off without them.”

I wanted to him to deny my question, but instead he accepted it like it was nothing. I stood there, stunned, and the High Priest began to explain the situation.

“In the past, there were twice as many blue-robed nobles here. Mathematically you can deduce that there were twice as many attendants and apprentice attendants. On average, a blue robe will have five to six attendants. Can you guess how many attendants were left behind when the blue robes returned to noble society?”

If ten-some nobles left, that would mean sixty to seventy

attendants were left behind in the temple. Considering that the temple kept the attendants fed and such through the donations and leftovers of blue robes, it wasn't hard to imagine that their mass departure would financially ruin the temple.

"We sold about thirty gray shrine maidens and priests to the nobles as attendants, but there are still far too many priests on our hands."

"Could you not send those priests to take care of the children?"

"Things will only get worse with more mouths to feed. Why do you think the High Bishop disposed of so many gray shrine maidens? It seems that you do not understand what I am telling you."

It was clear that as the number of blue robes increased over the coming years, the temple needed to have excess gray robes on hand to serve them. But at a time without enough divine gifts for everyone, the High Priest wanted to prevent the population of gray robes from increasing.

"...Can't you at the very least keep them clean? It's likely that disease will break out in an environment that filthy."

"Hm. So you suggest killing them all now, before sickness spreads? A logical solution, but not one that would reflect well on us."

"No! That's not what I meant."

I wanted to yell "*What's wrong with you?!*" at him, but swallowed the urge. The High Priest and I were not only in completely different positions, we had been raised in entirely different environments. His view of the world was as alien to me as mine was to him. We spoke the same language, but understanding each other was another matter.

"High Priest, why is the orphanage here if not to raise children without parents?"

"You misunderstand. The orphanage exists to train abandoned children into servants for the nobility."

My and his understandings of what orphanages should be couldn't be more different. The High Priest was completely unmoved by concepts such as pity or compassion. He let out a sigh that made it clear he was getting frustrated with my lack of understanding too.

"If you want to help those who are about to die, do as you wish. Do you want to become the director of the orphanage, a position no other desires, and shoulder full responsibility for the orphanage?"

His unexpected offer made me gasp. I wanted to help the orphans, but I didn't have the resolve necessary to direct the entire orphanage with all the responsibility. That was too terrifying.

"...I couldn't do that." I clenched my fist and shook my head slowly.

The High Priest nodded, then continued while looking me in the eye. "In that case, the present ratio of blue and gray priests provides

enough divine gifts to feed roughly forty of those in the orphanage to a satisfactory level. You have more disposable income than any other blue robe in the temple. Will you pay for the food of the forty plus remaining orphans?"

"I can't. I don't actually have control over most of the workshop income." I had already spent too much money on refurbishing my room and paying my attendants. I was just barely staying even by selling recipes. The Italian restaurant wasn't open yet, and I hadn't established anything that would be bringing me stable income. Supporting the orphans wasn't feasible with my current income.

"You won't shoulder responsibility and you won't spend your money. If you aren't willing to do anything, keep your silence. A half-baked sense of justice does not give you the right to speak on the matters of others. You need merely read your books quietly, without thinking about things beyond you."

The High Priest was so right I couldn't even argue. I didn't have the right to complain when I wasn't willing to do anything myself. In many situations, it was better to do nothing than to give a half-hearted attempt at helping.

"...I'm sorry for wasting your time." I left the High Priest's room with my head hung low. With his rejection, there was nothing more I could do. I had to just keep my silence. Or so I tried to tell myself, but the excuses just made me feel sick, like I had swallowed a brick.

"Sister Myne, would you like to go to the book room? Perhaps it would brighten your mood." Fran knelt and peered into my face. In contrast to his reluctance earlier, his tone was gentle and considerate.

"...Did you know this would happen, Fran?"

"My job was once to understand and serve the High Priest. I did expect that discussing this matter with him would leave you unhappy. Please, forget about the orphanage." Fran took my hand and guided me to the book room while I sluggishly walked behind. When reading books, I could absorb myself in the written word and forget my worldly troubles.

Unfortunately, sixth bell rang and Lutz arrived to get me in what felt like a matter of moments. I had to leave the book room and go to my room to get changed. Whether I wanted to or not, I could see the orphanage from the corridors on the way to my chambers. The moment I did, I remembered what I saw and the urge to vomit lurched within me.

"Ngh...!" I felt the vomit rushing up my stomach and held my mouth shut with my hands. I fought back hard to stop myself from throwing up. Fran hurriedly picked me up and ran to a closet, where he produced a cleaning bucket for me. As I threw up into the bucket, I

felt the urge to burst into tears.

I would never forget what I had seen. Maybe I could avoid thinking about it if I kept reading, but the memories would definitely surface whenever I was doing anything else. In my Urano days, Africa was so far from Japan that none of the suffering there had anything to do with me, and I could remain calm by donating a hundred yen or so when the chance arose. I would think *That's so sad* while watching TV and eating, then forget within an hour. But my chambers here were directly connected to the orphanage. It was impossible for me to live with any peace of mind knowing that there were orphans suffering like that just a wall away from me.

"Sister Myne, how'd it go?" Gil came rushing up to me. His purple eyes, dark enough to almost be black, were shining with so much hope that I had to look at the floor.

"I'm sorry, Gil. The High Priest refused to help."

"B-But why?!" Gil looked at me in a panic, almost stunned with disbelief. Not only had I failed to help save the orphans from their suffering, I hadn't even been able to meet Gil's expectations. I kept staring at the floor, my heart hurting, and prepared to endure whatever insults Gil would throw my way.

"Gil, contain yourself."

"Geez, don't be stupid. I told you not to expect anything, didn't I?"

Fran and Delia both warned Gil off. He looked like he wanted to say something, but tightened his lips instead and looked at the floor like I was. Delia gave a knowing shrug as she began preparing to change my clothes.

"This whole thing is really happening because the High Bishop cuts off his shrine maidens once they have children, calling them useless since they can't do their job. There's nothing the High Priest can do about it."

"Delia."

"It's true! Normally shrine maidens that just gave birth or have big bellies would take care of the orphans, but since the High Bishop doesn't want more priests to take care of, he disposes of them first. That said, since he needs gray shrine maidens to offer flowers to visitors, and he has to replace girls with big bellies, he can't get rid of all the gray shrine maidens. He needs some extra ones just in case."

The shrine maidens and apprentices left in the orphanage to clean and do laundry were all young and relatively attractive, according to Delia. Shrine maidens that gave birth were "disposed of," unattractive ones were sold to nobles as attendants, leaving only the cute ones who could offer flowers when necessary. Such was the result of the blue priests leaving so many of their attendants behind.

Men could work for a long time without any fears of pregnancy, so well-trained gray priests were sold to nobles as personal attendants for a high price. But since there were fewer nobles in general at the moment, there was less demand for them. There were currently more unsold gray priests than shrine maidens in the temple.

“Wait, does that mean the kids in the orphanage are the children of blue priests? They have noble blood?”

“At least half of them, uh huh. Myself included,” said Delia casually.

“Bwuh? Delia, you have mana?”

“Apparently it’s hard to have children with someone with way less mana than you. That means only blue priests with barely any mana could get their gray priests pregnant, and I’m pretty sure you can’t return to noble society if you have children in the temple.”

Which meant, in turn, all those still at the temple were those with barely any mana. The temple’s self-centered *modus operandi* made my head hurt.

“The High Bishop makes all the final decisions about how the temple is run, so it’ll be more effective to make him like you than to try and fight him. Now then, would the men please leave? I need to get Sister Myne changed.” Delia waved her hand to shoo Fran and Gil out of the room, then reached out to change my clothes.

“Geez! Smile a little, Sister Myne, it’s not like you’re going to die too. Just forget about them. There’s nothing you can do for them, after all,” said Delia as she speedily changed my clothes.

But she was wrong. I could do something. I could improve the orphanage’s situation if I used all of my funds from the Myne Workshop. But the High Priest and the High Bishop didn’t care, and the moment I ran out of money, things would go right back to how they were before. And most of all, I was scared to shoulder the responsibility of so many lives. It wasn’t that I could do nothing. It was that I was too afraid to do anything, to bet my life and money on them.

“Lutz! Lutz!” When Lutz came to get me, I jumped into his arms and hugged him tightly. I was just relieved to be back in a world where people understood me and I understood them. Tears flowed out of my eyes as if a dam had burst.

Lutz reflexively patted my head and looked at Fran, who was seeing me off. “What happened, Fran?”

“I will explain as we walk.” Fran glanced at the gate guard, then began to walk. He explained what had happened today as we traveled along the bustling city street.

“She then sought help from the High Priest. I advised that she give up after he refused, but Sister Myne’s heart continues to ache.”

“...Yeah, seeing dying kids is pretty rough. But there’s nothing you can do, Myne. Don’t worry about it. Just forget about them.”

I had lived a fairly peaceful life here despite my poverty, so what I had seen was far too intense for me to forget so easily. “I wish I could forget them. Ignorance is bliss. But now that I know there are kids starving to death behind the walls of my own room, I can’t pretend I don’t know anything,” I said while sniffing.

Lutz stopped and peered into my eyes. “You don’t like how messed up the orphanage is right now, yeah? What do you want changed?”

I envisioned what I had seen, thought about how I thought the orphanage should be instead, and then spoke. “...I want those kids to eat until they’re full, and then grow up healthily. I want them to sleep on at least clean sheets instead of that dirty, stinky, moldy hay that’s probably getting them sick.”

“Huh? Eat until they’re full? That’s something only rich people get to do. You gotta be satisfied with them eating enough to move around. Not even I get to eat until I’m full at home.”

Upon hearing my dreams, Lutz said I was hoping for too much. I thought back to my own home and suddenly realized something as I compared my old life to my faux-noble life in the temple. I had forgotten about it lately since I was eating tons of tasty food in the temple and my family’s budget had gotten more comfortable, but barely any kids in the lower city got to eat until they were full. Even Lutz had struggled with food for his whole life, constantly losing to his older brothers in fights over the dinner table.

“Oh, okay. Just getting enough food at all would have to do.”

“And anyway, where’s the sense in you trying to give them all that food yourself? They should go gathering their own food first. What’s the point in sitting around when you’re hungry? What’s gonna come from that?”

I had been thinking about the temple’s situation in a vacuum since it was such an isolated institution, but if I shifted my goal to getting the orphans on the same level as the children of the lower city, the costs necessary would drop down immensely. They could just go to the forest and gather their own food to supplement what I bought for them.

“Unfortunately, orphans are not allowed to leave the orphanage,” said Fran with a troubled tone. The orphans were generally kept locked in the orphanage, to prevent nobles from seeing them before they were baptized and probably to prevent them from learning more about the world on their own. I fell silent, not knowing what to say about that, but Lutz hadn’t spent much time in the temple and thus just shook his head.

“Who made that rule up? If the kids are dead weight, what’s the problem with letting them go to the forest? You and Gil are leaving the temple, so yeah.”

“They’re my attendants, it’s different.” They were only allowed to leave because their job now involved going in and out of the temple on business for me. The same was true for gray priests going to the Noble’s Quarter. They weren’t free to leave as they pleased.

“Alright, then why not make all the orphans your attendants? That’ll let them go outside, yeah?”

I looked up at Lutz, blinking in surprise at his unexpected idea.

“Wait just a moment,” interjected Fran. “That is simply out of the question. In the first place, surely Sister Myne would not be able to afford to provide all of them with the food, shelter, and clothing that masters are expected to give.”

“Since they’re just going to the forest, she could buy a bunch of clothes from our poor secondhand shops for cheap.”

I tried calculating in my head how much it would cost to buy enough knives and baskets for them to go to the forest. Naturally, there were enough chores in the temple that they couldn’t all go to the forest at once, but if I assigned them groups and rotated through them daily, I wouldn’t have to buy as many tools.

“...About fifty to sixty pairs of hand-me-downs, some knives, and some baskets should be cheaper than the fancy clothes I bought for you three, Fran.”

My words shocked Fran and he opened his eyes wide, looking down at the clothes he was wearing. I had bought high quality clothes for my attendants. They were incomparably better than the clothes I normally wore at home.

“Take them to the forest and let them gather everything edible to sort their own food problems out. The orphanage not having money just means they’re poor like me, y’know?” Lutz was being blunt, but he was right. When in need, you shouldn’t wait to be given stuff, you should be doing what you can to get it yourself.

“Fran, I can send them to the forest if they’re my attendants, right? Like how I’ve sent you and Gil to the Gilberta Company before?”

“That is the case, yes.”

“So I could have them go gather volrin wood for me too?” I suggested, which made Lutz’s eyes shine.

“You wanna make the orphanage a branch of the Myne Workshop?”

“Uh huh. If I make the orphanage a branch of the Myne Workshop, I can give the orphans an avenue for making money through making products. Even if I leave the temple in the worst-case

scenario, they might be able to sustain themselves independently.”

Though getting them to the forest and gathering ingredients to cook would come first. Lutz and I began discussing efficient methods and where changes should begin, at which point Fran reluctantly interrupted us.

“I believe this is a fine idea. However, Sister Myne, it is also entirely unlike how the temple has operated up until this point. The High Priest will once again ask if you are willing to bear the responsibility of so many lives. Will you be able to answer?”

I felt the blood drain from my face. Fran was right. It was hard to think that the temple would look lightly on an outsider like me ignoring traditions and turning the orphanage up on its head. That would cause friction with the High Bishop, the High Priest, and even the blue robes. Not to mention that earning money through work would inevitably introduce inequality.

“Sorry, Lutz. I’m just too scared of being responsible...”

“Alright then, Myne. Are you more scared of responsibility than of letting the orphans die?”

I was scared of both. If I abandoned the orphans, I knew I would feel the weight of their lives on my back for the rest of my life. But I also just wasn’t prepared to shoulder the responsibility of so many people either. As I clung my head miserably, Lutz shrugged.

“Y’know, Myne. Why think so hard about it? Just give it a shot and stop if it doesn’t work.”

“Lutz, it’s not that simple. There are lives on the line here.” I glared at Lutz and he gave a snort just like Benno might.

“It’s just a fact of life for workshops with no customers and stores with no sales to go out of business. But with the orphanage, your workers aren’t relying on you for everything.”

“...They’ll still have a place to stay, and there will still be the divine gifts.”

“Yeah. Why do you have to be so responsible for people who will always have a place to stay? Not to mention, I’m part of the Myne Workshop too.”

There would be points where I would need to bear responsibility. Benno would probably give a different perspective if I asked about my duties as forewoman. But... for some reason, Lutz being with me took all my worry away. I’d be scared to do everything by myself, but if Lutz stayed with me, I somehow thought that things would be okay no matter what.

“Let’s do it together, Myne. You want to save them, don’t you?”

“Yeah!” I grabbed onto Lutz’s held-out hand.

Seeing that, Fran smiled in defeat. “I will assist you as well, Sister Myne.”

Secret Talk With the High Priest

I had decided to save the orphans, but there wasn't much I could do on the way home. After talking things out with Lutz and Fran, I decided to do my work carefully, with the key point being "save lives."

I wasn't sure how well the starved orphans could handle food, so I started by making light soup with chunks of bread in it, which Lutz delivered to them through the back door. Fran had said that if he delivered divine gifts to the front door while Gil stealthily delivered the soup from the back door, we could feed the small kids without anyone noticing.

"Gil is the one most worried about them, so he should take this work very seriously."

"I'll give Gil some of my clothes and tell him to use them when he's doing dirty work," offered Lutz.

That was all I could do today, but I felt better knowing that at the very least it meant that they wouldn't starve to death overnight. But in contrast to my relief, Fran looked at me with a stiff expression.

"Sister Myne, please be careful around Delia. It is very likely that the High Bishop will be opposed to saving the orphans."

"...And the High Priest won't?" I thought that the High Priest was fairly opposed to it as well, but I wasn't sure what Fran was thinking. His eyes widened a bit in surprise at my question.

"I will discuss this matter with the High Priest. I know that he is just as frustrated as you are with the abandonment of the orphanage and the treatment of gray priests and shrine maidens."

"What? It certainly didn't seem that way to me." I tilted my head in confusion and Fran lowered his eyes regretfully.

"Do you remember what Delia said? The High Bishop has ultimate authority within the temple. For this reason, the High Priest hides his true feelings and intentions behind a well-composed mask so that they are not detected. It may be exceedingly hard to notice, but he is very frustrated with the High Bishop right now."

"...I didn't realize that at all." What kind of detective would it take to realize from our prior conversation that the High Priest was frustrated with the High Priest? Could Fran read the High Priest's mind? I fell into thought, baffled, and Lutz shrugged his shoulders.

"Sounds like you gotta tell the High Priest that Myne's not

understanding him.”

“Indeed. Sister Myne will need to study the roundabout, euphemistic ways of the nobility.” The two of them looked at me with the kind of pity a teacher might look at a failing student with. Ouch.

Over the next few days, Fran and I discussed how best to approach the High Priest while Gil continued to stealthily deliver the food. Since the Myne Workshop would be involved I even wrapped up Benno in this, who grimaced and complained about me sticking my head into trouble again. I wanted to get the High Priest’s permission as soon as possible so I could start working on improving the orphanage, but Benno yelled at me for being thoughtless again.

“Don’t just charge straight to your goal like that! It might be annoying to deal with nobles properly, but preparing ahead of time and laying the groundwork before meeting them is essential! Really, you could say the outcome of a meeting is decided before it begins. Nothing good will come from you just rushing to meet him without a plan.”

“Master Benno is correct. Sister Myne, you always act as soon as you make a decision, but when it comes to important discussions, it is normal to communicate your requests and what you know to them before arranging a meeting. When discussing matters with nobles, one must not be impatient. Take as much time as you can to lay the groundwork that will ensure as favorable of an outcome as possible for you.”

Fran informed me that me meeting with the High Priest right after seeing the orphans and repeatedly asking for his help on an emotional basis was, in reality, enormously rude and a blatant violation of polite manners. Things would not go well for me if I didn’t give the High Priest enough information and time to prepare.

“This will be a good opportunity for you, Sister Myne. Please observe and learn how to arrange a meeting with a noble and prepare for it ahead of time. This will be very important to you in the coming years.”

As the result of several conversations on the matter, I decided to accept the position of orphanage director and use funds earned by the Myne Workshop to improve the orphanage on the basis of establishing a branch there.

First, we would wash up the pre-baptism children and have the older kids clean every inch of the orphanage. Once that was done, they would establish the workshop in the basement of the boys’ building and bring in the tools, hearth, and so on necessary for cooking and making paper.

I had three main groups in mind for splitting the work up: a

paper-making slash forest-gathering group, an orphanage chores group, and a temple work group. They would rotate once monthly and get experience in all forms of work. Then, I would ask about them their individual preferences and place them accordingly. One could choose their own jobs at will.

I would need to list up the clothes and tools we needed, not to mention buy them through Benno. To get the funds for everything, I had Lutz and Ralph carve wooden hangers. They were hangers I was well used to, with rounded shoulders. I explained to Benno that they damaged clothes less than the cross-shaped hangers I had seen before, and he jumped on them with gleaming eyes. *Thanks for the business, as always.*

“What’s the ultimate goal of the Myne Workshop Orphanage Branch?” asked Benno, sizing me up. If I couldn’t give him a proper answer, he would call me an idiot again. So I told him the answer I had long settled on by now.

“To earn enough funds to pay for the orphanage’s food. I would like for them to be capable of independently earning the money necessary to pay for food when just divine gifts aren’t enough.”

“Food? That’s all?”

“The temple gives them most everything they need, like clothes and shelter, so I’m fine as long as it earns enough profit to cover their food.”

Lutz said they could just gather food in the forest if they didn’t have money, but given the size of the orphanage, it wouldn’t be sustainable to send them for food out every day. There wouldn’t be enough food in the forest to go around. Once we knew if the workshop there could earn money, I could temporarily pay for their food until the workshop was earning enough for them to cover it themselves.

As I answered Benno’s questions, Lutz wrote out the price of paper and the price of food to do some math. “...Looks like it’ll be surprisingly easy to cover just the food. But if you’re gonna pay, Myne, why bother teaching them to gather?”

“I want them to learn to gather while they’re making paper. That way, worst-case scenario, they’ll be able to get food for themselves before starving to death. Without the right knowledge, they’ll just pick up poison mushrooms like I used to.”

“You sure did pick a lot of poison mushrooms...”

Once we had a clear goal with all the relevant steps outlined, Fran stealthily discussed the matter with the High Priest, and although it wasn’t public yet, he approved of me becoming the orphanage director and establishing a branch of the Myne Workshop in the orphanage. On top of that, he permitted a meeting to make things official.

It seemed that you had to write a letter several days ahead of time when formally requesting a meeting, so I wrote one after being taught the proper format. ...*Dealing with nobles sure is a pain.*

By the time the letter of invitation arrived from the High Priest, the kids in the orphanage had already gotten a lot better thanks to Gil's efforts. Gil said that they could eat harder foods in addition to their soup now, and they were bit by bit getting more energetic. They were healthy enough that they could survive being bathed while their waste-filled rooms were cleaned.

When third bell arrived and signaled it was time for our meeting, I went to the High Priest's room with Fran. Gil and Lutz were standing at the ready in my chambers, prepared to start work at any moment.

"Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me."

"Myne, noble women do not speak like that."

According to the High Priest, noble women would say "I thank you ever so much" instead. There was a period in history where it was popular for women to make themselves sound a bit more dramatic, and various vestiges of that era remained to this day. I had mostly learned my polite language from the Gilberta Company and guards at the gate, so I probably had more exposure to male speech patterns than female speech patterns.

"It seems you will need a gray shrine maiden to instruct you on language as well. But that can wait. We have more important matters to discuss today." The High Priest had cleared the room before I arrived, leaving only Arno. I started to walk toward his desk, but then the High Priest suddenly walked in the opposite direction, toward his bed.

"High Priest?!" Arno let out a cry of surprise. Fran also looked shocked.

I just followed after the High Priest, not really sure what was going on. He parted the curtains surrounding his bed, some distance away from the frame itself, and beckoned me forward. I tilted my head in confusion, then saw that there was a door built in the wall beside his bed.

"We will talk in here." The High Priest pressed his hand on the door and immediately a sparkling blue magic circle arose, making the gemstone of a ring on his finger shine bright red. The ring's red light did a lap through the magic circle, then faded.

"Not even my attendants can enter this room. Come, Myne." The door opened with a click and the High Priest entered with neither Arno nor Fran. The dark room was scary enough that I looked back at Fran with worry. He gave a light nod, prompting me inside.

"E-Excuse me." The moment I went inside and the door shut, a window appeared in the once-dark room and allowed a bright stream

of light to pour inside. It was very sudden, as shutters had been opened very quickly.

“Bwuh?!” As I covered my eyes and waited for them to adjust, I could hear the High Priest moving around. I slowly opened my eyes and saw that the once pitch-black room was actually a study, resembling a college lab room to some degree.

There were all manner of scrolls and parchment scattered across a desk and shelves, not to mention a stack of several books. One of the shelves had tools I had never seen before lined up next to each other, but I could tell they were related to science somehow. The corner of the room seemed to be a rest area with a cushioned bench, but there were documents covering it too. The room, unlike the one kept clean by his attendants, was entirely his own. I was in the High Priest’s private, personal study.

“This room is built such that only those with mana above a certain quantity can enter. I believe that you are the only other person in the temple that is capable of entering it. There is no better place for a private talk.”

“This is a really cool hidden room. It’s like, just what I’d expect from magic...”

The High Priest looked at me while cleaning the documents off the bench. “...Your chambers have a room just like this.”

“They do? I didn’t know that.” I had never parted my bed’s canopy, especially since the bed was just a frame without a mattress. Considering how often I collapsed, it would probably be smart to get a mattress at some point.

“Though as it requires a mana registration to use, you won’t be able to get inside at the moment..”

“Mana registration?”

“We can discuss the process another day. Let us get straight to the point. Sit.” The High Priest cut the conversation on that subject short and pointed to the bench he had just cleaned off. He himself brought over the chair by his desk to sit on. When he looked up, he wasn’t wearing a blank expression like the one Fran often wore. His brows were furrowed and his mouth was bent into a sharp frown.

...Is he going to lecture me? Over the past few days of being critiqued by Fran, I could imagine what the High Priest was going to say. He had probably taken me to this room so he could lecture me where no attendants could see. And since we were alone, I couldn’t ask for Fran’s help. I was on my own.

“U-U-Um, High Priest. Why are we talking here in this room?”

“Because Fran advised me that you did not understand how nobles communicate.” He glared at me.

In general he had the face of a somewhat cold, expressionless

person, so seeing him furrow his brows in clear displeasure was very frightening indeed. Unlike Benno dropping thunder, the High Priest's anger was icy cold and made me feel like ice was steadily freezing me from the bottom up.

"And sure enough, the day before you spoke of important, reckless things without thinking first. On that day, one of the High Bishop's attendants was in my room on business. Did you notice?"

"I didn't notice at all."

"I suppose, then, you didn't understand that you were criticizing and insulting the High Bishop in the presence of his attendant while I practically perished on the inside, agonizing at every word that came out of your mouth."

"...I-I'm sorry." I had thought that I was helping the High Priest understand the horror of the situation, but in reality I was just criticizing the High Bishop's method while the High Priest, his attendants, and basically everyone there had broken out in a cold sweat.

"At the very least, you must learn the names and faces of every blue robe, in addition to the faces of their attendants. How do you intend to survive when you know nothing of your enemies? You are too careless." The High Priest's exasperated expression looked a lot like the one Benno made. It seemed I was fated to be lectured and berated no matter where I went.



“...Mr. Benno often calls me a thoughtless idiot.”

“Now that you mention it, I do recall him saying that you trust others too easily, and that you never learn despite being tricked. I fully agree with Benno’s assessment. If you are to stand with nobles as a blue shrine maiden, you will need to learn the ways of the nobility.”

The High Priest’s rebukes all came from a place of worry for me and my precarious position. It was just as Fran had said. He had hidden his intentions and true feelings so deeply I hadn’t noticed them, but in truth, the High Priest had been protecting me from the High Bishop.

“You seem uninterested in picking up on hidden signals and intent on openly stating your feelings on everything, but that will get you killed in noble society. Consider me uninterested in dying over your ignorance. Since it is impossible for me to tell if you are understanding my signals, I have decided it is best to talk with you here when I do not wish for our conversation to be heard by others.”

“I’m really, really sorry.” I would only understand the High Priest if he stated his thoughts directly, so he had taken me to the one place where he could do that. It was inconvenient, but a big help for me.

“In any case. According to Fran, you have decided to become the orphanage director. Are you certain that this is what you want? You said before that you would not bear that responsibility.” The High Priest gave me a steady look, his piercing eyes leaving no room for secrecy.

I straightened my back. My resolve to save the orphanage had long since been steeled. I returned his look head-on, hoping to at least convey how determined I was. “To be honest, I’m still afraid to have that much responsibility. But anything is better than leaving them like that. I want to help them if I can.”

“I see. If you have the resolve necessary, I have no issue with it.” He approved my request so casually that I couldn’t help but look at him with my shock written on my face.

“Really? You’re fine with it?”

“Did I not reply with my approval through Fran?”

“You did, but you’re being so different from the last time we talked, I just don’t know what to say...”

“What do you expect? You would not understand me if I spoke indirectly.”

“Awww... I’m sorry.” As I apologized yet again, the High Priest went and got several pieces of parchment. After running his eyes over them, he showed them to me.

“Fran explained your plan to me in general terms, but I did not grasp it in full. It seems that Fran didn’t quite understand it either. He

said that the discussion had proceeded with silent understandings and peculiar phrases unique to merchants. Please explain what exactly it is that you intend to do after becoming the orphanage director.”

“I will make the orphanage part of the Myne Workshop. First, I will work to improve the diet of the children who will be my workers, have them clean the orphanage which will be their workshop, and then bring in the tools necessary for them to do their job. After that, I plan to teach them how to cook for themselves. If they become capable of cooking soup, they will be able to make divine gifts last longer in a change that will drastically improve their food situation.”

“I see. What is the meaning behind you wanting to make all those in the orphanage your attendants?” asked the High Priest, glaring at me.

“...I want to send them outside the temple, which means they need to be attendants.”

“That is not necessary. If you did that, we would not have attendants ready when future blue robes arrive, and there would be needless friction. As director of the orphanage, you will have the authority to send apprentices outside of the temple at will.”

“Understood.” If the children could go outside, I had no reason to make them all my attendants. I nodded in understanding.

“What will you do once the children are well fed?”

“I will have them make plant paper. In the past Lutz and I made it by ourselves, so any child should be able to do it with proper instruction.”

“Plant paper, hm...” The High Priest glanced at the stacks of parchment on his desk. That reminded me that he had liked the plant paper the most out of Benno’s gifts.

“The paper will be sold through proper channels, and the Myne Workshop has already signed a magic contract stating that we will sell our goods through the Gilberta Company, so you won’t be able to take the paper away even if you wanted to.”

“A good decision, befitting a merchant. If the High Bishop will likewise be incapable of stealing the operation, I have no problem with it. What do you intend to accomplish by selling paper?” The High Priest advanced the conversation, his eyes narrowed slightly with disappointment.

“I want them to be able to buy food for themselves when they don’t have enough. That way I won’t have to buy their food myself, and they won’t be at risk of starvation from blue priests leaving.”

“What reason do you have for doing this? You wouldn’t work so hard for no personal gain, would you?” The High Priest’s gaze hardened, making it clear that was his most important question so far.

I returned his gaze without faltering.

“Obviously, so I can enjoy my reading without feeling guilty.”

“Come again?” His eyes widened in complete disbelief.

“It’s impossible for me to not worry and feel bad when there are kids starving to death so close to me. I can briefly forget while focusing on reading, but the memories resurface when I’m done and the guilt is unbearable. It just makes me feel horrible.”

“So in short, you will become the orphanage director and run a branch of your workshop here simply to remove an obstacle to your reading?”

“That’s right.” I gave a big nod, and the High Priest rubbed his temples.

“You are... more of a fool than I thought.”

“I get that a lot.”

“...Enough of that. What is your time frame? How long will it take the orphanage to stabilize after you assume your position?”

“Most of the preparation work is done, so given the season, it should only be a month before we’ve made and sold enough paper to buy a decent amount of food.”

“Oh? I see you prepared well beforehand this time,” murmured the High Priest.

I had shown my plan to Benno and Fran multiple times to make sure it would be fine both from a merchant’s perspective and from the nobility’s perspective, so it was hard to imagine it having any sizable holes. They said the most unreliable part of the plan was me, which cut deep and remained fresh on my mind.

“Very well. You have my permission.”

“Thank you. Fran said that you would be understanding if I communicated more properly. Mr. Benno also said that you have a good look in your eyes, and I should talk to you when I’m worried about something. High Priest... why are you different from the other priests?” I asked, knowing that it was a question that would get me yelled at if we were outside. And just as expected, the High Priest sighed and told me not to ask that kind of thing outside of this room.

“I don’t intend to tell you my life story, but I was not raised within this temple, just as you were not. I was raised in noble society and entered the temple due to personal circumstances. Which is exactly why, despite my distaste for the High Bishop and his methods, it is not yet wise to stand against him. You would also do well to avoid angering him more than you already have.”

“...Me running the orphanage won’t make him angry?” The orphans making money for themselves ran in exact opposition to how the High Bishop had been running things. I timidly asked for confirmation and he gave a derisive laugh.

“It’s a bit late to worry about that. I do intend to claim I forced the role on you, but don’t overreach. You are so unfamiliar with the ways of our culture that I cannot even fathom what you might do unattended. Report everything you do to me first. And listen well to Fran’s advice. Understood?”

After firmly emphasizing the importance of clear communication, the High Priest took me out of the room and I returned to my chambers with Fran. Gil and Lutz welcomed us with their eyes full of hope.

“How’d it go, Myne?”

“He got really mad at me. He told me to study noble culture more. He said I was thoughtless, reckless, and all sorts of things...”

“Does that mean he won’t let you be the orphanage director?” Lutz and Gil’s faces clouded with worry. I hurriedly shook my head.

“No, he gave his permission. I’m the orphanage director now. The Myne Workshop will be fine. It’s just, I feel like I’m destined to make people mad wherever I go...”

“That’s just who you are, Myne.” Lutz plopped a hand on my head with a laugh.

There was one more thing I had to do before I could start fixing the orphanage for real. I had to talk things out with Delia. Her job was to leak information about me to the High Bishop, and I needed to stop that from happening. It would be impossible for Delia not to notice everything going on in the orphanage, with Lutz and Benno arriving frequently, the servants running around, and so on. But I didn’t want the High Bishop interfering before the workshop stabilized.

Delia said she wanted me to help the orphans if they could be helped, so she was probably personally in agreement with my plan. There was no chance that she would say they’d be better off dead now that I had all the preparations made.

So, I decided to just open up to Delia and ask her directly. She had warmed up to me enough to mention she was meeting with the High Bishop’s attendants, so it would probably be better to just be upfront rather than hide my request in signals and euphemisms.

“Um, Delia. I’m trying to save the pre-baptism kids. I don’t want the High Bishop getting in the way of me helping them. It would be very helpful if you didn’t tell him what we’re doing. You want to save the kids too, don’t you? Can I ask you to do this for me?”

Delia fell silent for a while, then shut her eyes tightly and shook her head as if remembering something. “...I don’t want to go to the orphanage. I don’t want to remember, and I don’t want to get involved.”

“Yes, I know. All you’ll need to do is stand in the kitchen and keep an eye on the chefs. Just pretend you don’t know what’s going on. Can

I ask you to do that?" It was important to always have someone watching the chefs and managing the food, so at least one of my attendants had to stay in my chambers at all times. If I selected Delia to be that one attendant, she wouldn't have to go to the orphanage.

"Certainly, I'll keep quiet. But this isn't for your sake, Sister Myne, it's for the kids. Don't think you've won me over." Delia, while looking away from me with a frown to hide her relief, promised to keep quiet about what we were doing.

I let out a relieved sigh of my own and gave Delia a promise too. "Thank you, Delia. I will save them, no matter what."

"I-I didn't ask you to do that or anything. But if you're going to try, well, don't even think about failing."

...Her attitude's kind of harsh, but I guess I can interpret that as her having faith in me?

Cleaning Up the Orphanage

After eating lunch, we immediately went to work cleaning the orphanage. But the cleaning had to be done by the people who lived there. The temple had an excess of orphan gray priests, and although they had been doing laundry in the morning and then cleaning in the afternoon up until the past few years, in recent times they consistently ran out of work to do by noon. Thus we decided to start the cleanup in the afternoon, when there would be a lot of idle priests.

On the surface we would be framing the cleanup as a way to avoid shaming me, the orphanage director and blue-robed shrine maiden, with a filthy place of work. Apparently, having a reason like that would make the people of the orphanage more willing to go out of their way and do work they usually didn't do.

My goal with cleaning the orphanage was actually twofold. Getting it clean was the obvious part of it, but I also wanted them to learn that they would get paid if they worked hard. To that end, I had a chef making soup to reward those who helped clean, and I was planning on presenting buttered potato-fuffs to the thirty priests who worked the hardest.

The priests split into multiple groups before beginning work: those who would wash the children when it was warm outside, those who would clear the floor where the pre-baptism children were, those who would clean the rest of the girls' building, those who would help transport the workshop tools, and those who would clean the boys' building and other miscellaneous areas.

Fran and Gil had been really surprised when Benno and I suggested it. In general, the work of temple servants involved washing clothes, cleaning, and praying. Everyone did laundry together in the morning, everyone prayed together, and so on. Everything was always done together, and they were never split into groups. I explained that splitting into groups would speed up the process of cleaning such a large area, and that a group of stronger adults was important for carrying in the tools and such.

"Will they listen to me and do their work if I tell them to split into groups?"

"It'll be fine. Everyone still considers Fran to be one of the High Priest's attendants."

To the gray priests and apprentices in the orphanages, Fran being

trusted by the High Priest made him their superior. Gil explained that if he took the lead, the orphans would do their work even if they weren't too happy about it.

"Though there are some number of children who will likely disobey," said Fran while glancing at Gil. Although Gil now took his work seriously, in the past he was apparently quite the problem child and really wore down the caretaker priests. He avoided eye contact with Fran, which made me giggle.

Fran and Gil patrolled the orphanage, making sure everyone was doing their job and checking to see who was working hard while reporting the details and the overall progress of the cleanup to me. Lutz was in the boys' building, monitoring the cleaning and getting the tools from the Myne Workshop where they needed to be. He would then make buttered potato-fuffs there once everything was done. Delia was cleaning my chambers while keeping an eye on the chefs.

"I believe I shall patrol as well—"

"You're staying here, Myne. Don't want you collapsing out there somewhere." Lutz stopped me before I could even finish my sentence and gave me an exasperated look as I fell silent with a frown.

"Y'know, Sister Myne. We're cleaning the orphanage so the apprentice blue shrine maiden who's becoming the orphanage director can go inside. What do you think'll happen if you go there before the cleaning's done?"

"Oh right, I didn't think about that..." I sighed, since without Fran I couldn't even go to the book room. Seeing that, Fran gave a smile filled with compassion and set a piece of parchment in front of me. It was filled from top to bottom with methodical handwriting that reflected Fran's personality well.

"There is much for you to learn, Sister Myne. You must first memorize this entire greeting, which you will need to recite this evening when you go to the orphanage in an official capacity for the first time. Take particular care not to mistake the names of the gods." He had written it on paper so I could cheat by looking at it if necessary, but in general I would need to memorize these kinds of things.

I sighed as I looked at the parchment. Seeing that, Fran continued to smile and presented board after board to me.

"If you have the time, here is a list of the teas and varieties of milk we have at the temple. Here is your preferred kind. Here is Master Benno's, here is Lutz's, and here is the High Priest's. You would do well to memorize the preferences of your guests."

I doubted the High Priest would ever come to my chambers, but I didn't say that. I could at least understand the principle of understanding the tastes of your boss.

Lutz, barely holding back a fit of laughter at the stack of boards in front of me, gave me a thumbs up (a gesture that might just be universal across all worlds). “Good for you, Myne. You’ve got lots of stuff to read now.”

“I like reading, but I don’t like memorizing things.” Excluding things I was very interested in, my brain always forgot the last thing I read as soon as I started reading something new, which sucked. I slumped my shoulders sadly as I took the stack of documents that Fran had organized for me.

After fifth bell rang, Fran returned to write names on a board. They were the names of the kids who had proactively worked hard and the names of those who had hid to avoid work.

“The pre-baptism children that you were especially worried about have been cleaned head to toe, Sister Myne. The soap and towels prepared beforehand were put to use as soon as it was warm enough outside. They are now wearing the secondhand clothes you bought and stuffing fresh hay into sheets.” They were making their own mattresses out of cheap used sheets and the hay I had bought from a farmer.

“Are any of them sick, or too weak to move?”

“No, they are all quite fine, entirely thanks to Gil bringing them food so consistently. The children now revere him as a savior. And likely you as well, since he told them he acted on your orders.”

Hearing that honestly made me kind of fuzzy on the inside. I was just happy that the kids were feeling better.

“A few of the shrine maidens and apprentices who were in the kid washing group made mattresses, while the rest left to assist the other groups. That is all I have to report right now. I will be getting back to my patrol now.”

“Thank you, Fran. This is all going so well thanks to you.”

Fran gave a slight nod, then returned to the orphanage. A bit later, Lutz came back.

“Myne, the basement of the boys’ building is all clean now, so we’re gonna start bringing in the workshop tools.”

“Okay. Thanks, Lutz.”

“These people are crazy, y’know. Cleaning is like breathing to them. Never seen anyone clean as fast as them.” Lutz gave his report somewhat excitedly, then speedily walked back to his post. Almost immediately after, Fran returned, wrote down the names he heard from Gil, then power-walked back outside.

Everyone was so busy, but I was stuck at my work desk (that had arrived just a few days ago), staring at Fran’s handwriting. The names of the gods were long, and there were a lot of them. I honestly wanted to suggest nicknames to the High Priest to make them easier to

remember and more friendly sounding. *Like, what about Flue or Rane instead of Flutrane? Haha... He'd shoot me down in a second.*

The door to the kitchen was left open so Delia could glance inside while cleaning, which meant that eventually the smell of the reward soup cooking in the kitchen started wafting into my room. It seemed that the cleanup was finishing on pace while I thought about silly things.

"Sister Myne, the boys' building is all clean."

"Good work, Gil. That just leaves the girls' building, right?"

"Yeah. But boys can't go into the girls' building other than the dining hall, so yeah."

"Maybe you should start preparing to distribute the soup in the dining hall?"

Gil nodded and left excitedly, right as Lutz was walking inside.

"Hey, Myne. The workshop's all set up and ready, so I started steaming the potatoffels. Is that alright?"

"Why are you asking permission after starting...? But well, Gil just went to get the dining hall ready, so now's as good a time as ever to start the potatoffels." I giggled, but Lutz leaned in and lowered his voice.

"These people have never even seen potatoffels. They've only seen eaten food that's already cooked. They all gathered around me when I started steaming them. It was a pain in the butt."

"...That makes sense. They only eat divine gifts, so the orphanage doesn't cook meals itself. I guess it's reasonable that they've never seen ingredients before?"

Speaking of which, back in my Urano days I saw an article in a magazine saying that many kids couldn't recognize wild carrots — they only knew the cleaned ones with the leaves cut off. If that was the case in Japan with the internet and such, it wasn't hard at all to imagine the priests here not knowing anything that they didn't directly encounter in their day-to-day lives.

"Alright, I gotta go teach them how to work the butter in." Lutz left again with butter, knives, and a grin on his face. This time, Fran entered after him.

"As expected, the basement of the girls' building, where the pre-baptism kids were, is proving difficult to clean. Currently, everyone assigned to cleaning the girls' building is working together to finish it. I imagine they will be done before long. In addition, unlike the boys' building, there are not many people presently living in the girls' building. I have decided to give the empty rooms to the pre-baptism children, with the understanding that this is consistent with your wishes. We are currently taking their clothes and hay-stuffed mattresses to the rooms."

Fran's report made me sigh in relief. It was great that the kids would have decent places to sleep.

"Sister Myne, have you finished memorizing the greeting?"

"...Somewhat, but I'm not entirely confident in my memory. Could I bring this piece of paper with me?"

"Certainly. With that done, I will call for you when everything is prepared. Delia, please get Sister Myne ready."

Delia took Fran's place and started doing my hair. She sat me in front of the mirror and pulled out my hair stick. As she held a brush in her hand, she looked at me through the mirror with a sad, pained expression.

"...Did you save them?"

"Right now, they're healthy enough to stuff straw into their own new mattresses."

"Ah." Despite my positive report, Delia's expression didn't brighten. She furrowed her brow and looked away, as if she had just swallowed something bitter.

"...Delia, you look down. What's wrong? Isn't this what you wanted?"

"I'm happy, but frustrated. Why... Why couldn't you have saved me too, when I was there?"

"I wasn't even at the temple back then, that's kind of unreasonable..."

"I know that! I know, but..." Delia yelled out, knowing her frustration was unjustified but unable to do anything about it. Tears were on the verge of dripping out of her light-blue eyes. It was clear just how much suffering she had gone through before her baptism, just how many times she had begged to be saved to no avail. It hurt my heart to see.

"I wasn't in time to save you, but if you're ever in trouble again, I'll be there. I'll save you next time, so please... don't cry."

"I'm not crying!"

"S-Sorr—"

"Don't apologize to your attendant!" Delia aggressively rubbed her eyes while rejecting my apology. She was a proud girl and probably didn't want to admit to crying. *But still... Delia sure is being unreasonable here, isn't she? What a cutie.*

My introduction as orphanage director was something of a special occasion, so I wore the special hair stick I had made for my baptism ceremony. It alone was enough to make even a commoner look like the daughter of a rich merchant at the very least.

"I've never seen a hairpin like this before."

"I made it for my baptism ceremony. The Gilberta Company has started selling them recently."

“...You made it? Yourself?”

“I had help, but I could make it on my own if I needed to. All I need are the materials.”

“The materials...” Delia looked at the ornament like a carnivore that had just found its prey as she brushed my hair before I put the hair stick in myself. She wasn’t used to weaving hair around a hair stick yet, so there was no helping that.

“Sister Myne, the preparations are ready.” The fresh soup was split into several pots, which were put onto a cart. There were many gray priests I had never seen before with Fran standing behind them. “These are the priests that will help carry and distribute the soup.”

“Thank you all. I appreciate the help.”

“It is we who should be thanking you. They will surely be very grateful, as there have not been many divine gifts lately.”

“Oh, but this soup is not a divine gift. It is a reward.”

“A reward...?” The priests blinked, not really understanding what I meant, but I just responded with a smile.

Fran carried me through a hall and eventually we arrived in front of the orphanage. It was a surprisingly long walk since we had to loop around the building while matching the slow pace of the cart.

Fran set me down in front of the door and checked to make sure my hair and clothes were still neat. Once that was done, a gray priest opened the door and spoke loudly so that his voice echoed to all those within.

“With the divine protection of the mighty King and Queen of the endless skies and the mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, the shrine maiden newly appointed as the orphanage director has arrived.”

The door opened straight into the orphanage’s dining hall. It was a bit surprising to see rows of long tables right at the entrance, but given that divine gifts had to be delivered here daily and that boys could only enter the dining hall, it was overall fairly efficient.

Although the rows of gray robes had been sitting on the benches, they all stood up upon my arrival and faced my way. The sheer number of eyes on me and the people clearly sizing me up made me want to look at the floor, but before I could...

“Let us welcome her with a prayer to the gods. Blessed be the gods!” It was impossible for me to look away from the sudden sight of a mass group of people making that ridiculous praying pose.

“Sister Myne, this way.” Fran took my hand and guided me to a podium resting on a square of carpet. The older priests closer to the entrance were making sharp poses, but the smaller kids further back were struggling to maintain their balance. It would be hard to say which of us were worse at it.

As everyone's eyes returned to me after finishing their prayers, Fran set me on the podium and whispered into my ear, "Please give your speech like a noble, with dignity and authority."

It seemed that leaving a strong first impression would be an important step toward getting the gray priests to obey me. Just like Gil said, the gray priests and shrine maidens here all knew that I was a commoner despite being an apprentice blue shrine maiden. If I showed a lack of confidence or authority here, they would look down on me in a snap. I needed to exude the confident majesty of a noble, to keep my chin up and never lower my gaze. Keep smiling and maintain my composure. I just had to keep in mind what Benno had warned me about when we were going to give the donation.

On our way here, Fran had said with a smile that if things got bad, I could just lightly Crush them with my mana so that they would learn their place whether they liked it or not. I didn't exactly want to rule by fear, so ideally that wouldn't be necessary.

I somehow managed to memorize the long greeting, but the only experience I had talking in front of large groups was when I won some award for an essay I wrote and had to give a humiliating acceptance speech. That, and presenting my graduation thesis.

I took a deep breath, trembling in fear from all the eyes on me, and touched the swaying flowers on my hair stick. I felt more confident with this hair stick on, since I had made it with my family.

"Greetings, everyone. I am Myne, the one whom the High Priest selected to be the orphanage director on this vibrant summer day blessed by the God of Fire Leidenschaft. From the bottom of my heart, I express my joy for your warm welcome and future service."

The speech began with framing them as welcoming and serving me in a positive light, then ended with a prayer. I paused and took a breath so I wouldn't mess up the names of the gods.

"O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe! We offer you our prayers and gratitude."

Fran had apparently written for me the standard greeting for formal affairs in the temple. The gray priests responded immediately. "Blessed be the gods! Glory be to the gods!"

Fran and the High Priest had forced me to practice praying at least once a day since I started coming to the temple, so naturally I had gotten more used to it. Nobody could call me a master at it, but I wasn't losing my balance or falling over anymore. *Honestly, I'm striking a pretty mean pose right now, if I do say so myself.*

Once the greeting was over, it was time to distribute the rewards.

“Most of you worked together to clean the orphanage for my sake. I have brought a reward for those of you who did. Fran, please give the hard workers their reward.”

“As you wish, Sister Myne.” Fran took out a wooden board and began listing off the names of those who didn’t work. The gray priests distributing the soup skipped over those who had their names called, giving food only to the others. *This looks like lunches being handed out at school*, I thought absentmindedly while watching, until suddenly a boy about the same age as Gil who hadn’t been given food stood up and glared at me with his face bright red.

“This isn’t fair! Divine gifts are supposed to be given out equally! You’re a commoner and you don’t eve—”

“Indeed, divine gifts are given equally.” I smiled brightly at the boy who was acting entirely like Gil had at first. “But these are not divine gifts. Did you not hear me when I said these are rewards given to those who worked hard for my sake? Rewards are not equal. Unfortunately, those who do no work will not be rewarded. There is a saying that ‘he who does not work, shall not eat.’ You would all do well to remember this saying.”

The boy probably hadn’t expected me to argue back. He looked at me, stunned, as if he had forgotten his anger entirely. “...A-A reward?”

“Yes, a reward. Do your work next time. Also, I have brought further rewards for those who worked especially hard. Those who have their names called, please come to the front with your plates.”

Gray priests opened the steamers that Lutz had put the buttered potatoffels into. The scent of butter drifted through the dining hall. As Fran listed off names, priests and shrine maidens timidly came to the front while glancing at those around them. A gray priest placed one buttered potatoffel onto each plate.

“I heard that you raced to where the children were and began cleaning before anyone else. Thank you.”

“I was told you cleaned exceptionally fast. Lutz praised your work.”

“You proactively carried the heaviest loads yourself, yes? Fine work.”

I was just reading off the memo that Fran and Lutz had written about the hardest workers, but all of them looked at me with emotionally stricken expressions. Some of them even looked like Gil had, a sign that they had never been praised even once before in their life.

I couldn’t help but realize just how blessed I was to have a family like mine. Visions of my family heaping praise on me for every little thing I managed to do ran through my head. I felt that from now on I would need to search for the good points in the priests and give them

my praise as the orphanage director.

“Please continue your hard work. But for now, eat.”

The following day, I held a cooking class. Groups were split into those washing vegetables, those cutting vegetables, and those lighting and maintaining fires beneath the pots. Participants were being taught by Tuuli and Ella. Hugo, meanwhile, was working hard to make dinner by himself.

Ella and Tuuli primarily taught how to cut the vegetables. Adults used large chopping knives while kids used smaller multi-purpose knives. The fresh soup would be their reward and dinner, so everyone took their learning seriously. They were full of curiosity for the raw meat and vegetables that they had never seen before, and awkwardly chopped them up with inexperienced movements.

I observed as everyone made the first meal produced by the Myne Workshop. Fran told me that it would be fine to watch, but as a blue shrine maiden, helping at all was strictly forbidden. I felt eyes on my back and turned around to see the boy who had skipped out on work yesterday glancing my way while proactively chopping as many vegetables as he could. His intentions were so clear it was adorable, so I gave him extra reward fruit.

Ideas for New Products

Work at the orphanage was progressing at a steady rate. They cooked soup several times after the cooking class and managed to work quicker as they got used to it. The size difference between chopped vegetables was diminishing steadily. At times there were some kids who tried to put weird ingredients into the wrong soups, but it was mainly just funny to see the other kids rushing to stop them. I got the feeling that everyone looked brighter than before, maybe due to finally getting enough to eat. Soon enough, it became habit for them to do temple work in the morning and make soup in the afternoon.

Dad and Tuuli coincidentally both had a day off on the same day, so I forced a meeting with Benno, who had just returned after being absent for a few days visiting another city, and asked permission to borrow Lutz.

“Mr. Benno! Please lend Lutz to me all day today!”

“Sure, but only if I get to have you all day the next day.”

“...Is it just me, or do you have an evil look in your eyes right now?”

“Pretty sure that’s just you.”

It’s definitely not just me. I eyed Benno’s poker face cautiously, but in any case, with Lutz down I just had to get Tuuli and Dad on board.

“Dad, Tuuli, please. I want you to bring the orphanage kids to the forest! With you around, Dad, you should be able to get a bunch of kids the guards don’t know through the gate, right?”

“...I don’t mind, but won’t taking a bunch of orphans outside the city cause problems?”

“I have the High Priest’s permission, so it’ll be fine.” Dad had looked doubtful that I had gotten permission to do this, but he agreed to help. Tuuli also agreed to help since she was going to the forest anyway.

“I’m okay with bringing them, but what do you want to make them do out there, anyway?”

“Lutz will be there to teach them how to make paper, but I want you to teach them how to gather in the forest while the paper’s being made. They’ve never been to the forest before.”

Tuuli knew from teaching the orphans to cook that they lived in an entirely different world from us. She frowned a bit, likely thinking

back to how she had to teach them how to hold knives in the first place.

“Wouldn’t it be better to bring more people to teach them, since none of them will have been to the forest before?”

“You’re right, but I’ll be exposing how to make paper here. I want to only involve people close to me, if possible.”

“Okay. I’ll help you, Myne.”

“Yay! Thanks, Tuuli!”

And so, I assembled the personages necessary to take a bunch of the orphans — mainly those apprentice age or younger, but not all — to the forest. There were only a few adult priests, and most of them wanted to go, but they would need to stay at the temple this time. We had to go to the forest in the morning to have enough time to make the paper, and that would interfere with the adults’ daily work.

Everyone brought baskets, knives, billhooks for cutting wood, pots, and steamers. Lutz would teach them to gather volrin wood, steam it, peel off the bark, and make paper just like we had done together before our baptism. As the wood steamed, Tuuli and Dad would teach them how to gather. But to help prevent information leaks, they would teach only the distinguishing features of the wood, not the name, and for now we didn’t mention the ash and tororo parts of the process. That was mainly to minimize the chance of someone violating our magic contract by attempting to sell plant paper.

“Sister Myne, I’m gonna go learn. I’m gonna pay attention.”

“Yes, Gil. Go learn to gather and make paper well.”

Gil went off to the forest with his eyes sparkling, but I was staying behind at the temple. I had to do paperwork for the High Priest with Fran, get prayer lines beaten into my head, and suffer criticism for my prayer posture down to the movements of my fingers.

The passing days seemed calm and peaceful on the outside, but there was a constant storm going on in my head. Or well, maybe it would be more accurate to say there was a burning chariot which I rode into the sunset as my pockets emptied. I had spent an exorbitant amount of money furnishing my room, the kitchen, and the orphanage. My money was draining, and fast. Considering that I might be forced to spend some unknown amount of money on noble obligations or some such thing, I wanted to fill my pockets again as soon as possible.

“I sold the idea for hangers earlier, and I should save cooking-related things for when the restaurant’s open, so... What should I do here? Maybe I should finally turn the things I talked to Lutz about earlier into products? Mmm...”

“Sister Myne, you seem to have something on your mind. Might I ask what it is?”

“I’m just thinking about money, really...”

We headed to gate, thinking that it was about time for everyone to be getting back from the forest, and on the way we heard excited chattering from the other side of the gate. The kids came running into the temple with big smiles on their faces.

“Sister Myne! We’re back!”

“Welcome back. Did you gather a lot of things at the forest?”

“We brought back lots of black bark.”

“I brought the most!”

“I see! Very impressive. Now you just have to take the bark to the workshop to dry. Lutz, if you would.”

Lutz set up the black bark to dry in the Myne Workshop, Dad explained how to maintain a knife, and Tuuli taught them how to prepare and eat what they gathered in the forest.

“Now then, let us express our thanks for those who have taught you so much.” I had intended for them to just say “Thank you!” and leave it at that, but I forget we were in the temple. The orphans all yelled “Praise be to our teachers!” and genuflected, their heads pressed against the floor. Dad and Tuuli were both so shocked they recoiled a bit.

“...Um, this is how people in the temple express their thanks, so... I-It’s kind of like saying they’re as grateful to you as they are to the gods, which is, um, good...”

“Yeah, I know. I know, but dang. It threw me off.”

I explained to Dad and Tuuli what was going on in a quiet voice, then had the orphans — who had finished genuflecting — return to the orphanage.

“The priests who stayed behind made soup. Remember to wash your hands before you eat. Also, be absolutely certain to clean yourselves before bed. You must have gotten very sweaty out there, given the heat.”

After seeing the orphans off, I let out a heavy sigh. “Sorry, everyone. Could you wait here for me? I’ll go get changed.” I returned to my room with Fran and had Delia change my clothes. When I had plans to stop by Benno’s store I could preemptively wear my apprentice merchant clothes and leave after just taking off my robes, but today I had worn my normal clothes just like Tuuli, which meant I had to change my entire outfit.

“Sister Myne, please get several more pairs of blue robes. Yours are all dusty since you’ve been to the basement. I want to wash them, which isn’t easy when you don’t have any spares,” complained Delia. The temple’s blue robes were made of high-quality cloth that felt smooth as silk. Buying spares would probably cost a hefty chunk of cash. I would need to think hard about making money.

"I'm back, sorry." I returned to the workshop after changing my clothes and locked the door. After giving Fran the key, I began the journey home with everyone.

"Lutz, I will now report what Myne did today." Fran, holding a board, reported to Lutz what I had done over the day and how healthy I seemed. He had to do that pretty much every day, but it was hard to open ink jars and use pens outside, so he wasn't able to write down everything he wanted to. Which made me suddenly remember something.

...Maybe it's finally time to make the notepad? I could expect for there to be enough demand to make them profitable since they weren't common, and plant paper was still expensive enough to drive up the price. It was possible that notepads were more common than I thought, but they would still be good gifts for people like Fran and Lutz.

I started running through the steps in my head and figuring out what materials I needed, when suddenly I realized that Dad had picked me up at some point and we were already at the central plaza.

"Lutz, Lutz!" Still held up by Dad, I called out to Lutz, who was walking next to Tuuli. "Does Mr. Benno know any metal workshops?"

"Yeah, he does. What's up? Thought of something new?"

"Uh huh! Though I'll want to ask Ralph or Sieg to shape up some wooden planks for me." Not even Lutz, who was fairly dexterous with his fingers, could compare to the skills Ralph and Sieg had developed through training to be carpenters. I learned that well when they helped me make the hanger. Not to mention that since I intended to give a finished notepad to Lutz as a gift, it would be better if he wasn't personally involved with making it.

"What, you're not gonna ask me, your ol' dad?"

"You worked hard enough already today, Dad. Don't worry about this."

"I've still got some fight left in me today."

"Really? You're not going to drink and fall asleep?" I pursed my lips and peered at my Dad. After spending all day working outside and instructing a bunch of greenhorns, it was hard to imagine him doing anything but drinking and sleeping as soon as he could.

"...It'll be fine."

"You always say that, Dad. You're definitely going to drink and fall asleep, definitely." Tuuli said exactly what I was thinking. Unable to argue with Tuuli, Dad gave an exaggerated frown, his eyebrows digging into the bridge of his nose.

"If you promise you'll do it before you drink, I'll ask you instead, since it is a bit late to be going to Lutz's place."

"Alright, alright, I promise. Sheesh, you two are starting to act

more like Effa every day.”

“...And you think that’s the cutest thing in the world, yeah? We’ve all heard this before, lots of times.” Lutz shrugged as we all laughed.

After having Dad measure Lutz’s hand, we went home.

“So, what do you want me to make?”

Once home, Dad finished dinner while resisting the urge to drink. I started rummaging through our storage room for a suitable plank and tools.

“So, Dad. Which would be easier, carving out a lot of space out of a plank to pour wax into, or hammering in thick blocks around a thin plank to create a square space to pour wax into?”

“Yeah, gotta be the second one.”

“The wax won’t flow out?”

“Depends on how you do it, but it should be fine.”

With Dad’s suggestion in mind, I peered into the basket packed full of planks and looked for one of a good size.

“Okay. I want you to use a plank about this thick to make two boards the size of my hand, two the size of Lutz’s hand, and two the size of your hand.”

“How deep?”

“About as my deep as my finger, so the wax doesn’t flow out. Oh, and we’ll need holes to put string or rings through, so leave some space on the top end. Basically, I want something like this.” I explained while drawing a picture and Dad nodded, rubbing his chin, then got to work.

While Dad was busy, Tuuli and I bathed. The middle of summer was approaching and even just doing paperwork was enough to get me sweaty, not to mention that Tuuli was covered in dirt from going to the forest.

“So, Myne. What are you having Dad make?”

I got into the washtub first while Tuuli washed my hair with handmade rinsham. I answered while enjoying the bliss of my scalp being massaged. “A notepad.”

“A notepad? Isn’t that what you called that bundle of failed paper you had?”

“I would have liked to use good paper, but yes.” I smiled and wiped my body down. Once that was done, we switched places and I started washing Tuuli’s hair. “To be more accurate, I’m actually making what’s called a (diptych), but you can just think of it as a notepad that’s harder to erase than a stone slate.”

“Why did you ask if Benno knew any metal workshops?”

“I want to order a (stylus).”

The next day, I put the modified boards Dad had made me in my

tote bag, had Lutz carry it for me, and went to the Gilberta Company with him just like I usually did. Since I had sold my soul to Benno for the day in return for borrowing Lutz, the timing couldn't have been better.

"Mr. Benno, please tell me what store sells wax and introduce me to a metal workshop."

"What're you plotting this time?"

"Do you really have to phrase it like that...? I want to make a gift for Lutz and Fran, but I can't make it myself, so I want you to introduce me to workshops that can."

The moment I said that, Lutz's eyes fell to my tote bag. He blinked in confusion after seeing the boards packed inside. "A gift for me and Fran...? What about Gil?"

"I think stone slates will be better for Gil and Delia, since they don't know how to write yet."

Lutz gave a disinterested "Hmmm," but he was smiling a bit. In contrast, Benno's mouth was bent into a frown.

"Hey. Myne. You don't have anything for me?"

"...If you see the finished products and want one, you can order better bases from carpenters. One carved by an amateur wouldn't suit you."

Benno, as the owner of a large store surrounded by expensive things at all times, would undoubtedly stick out if he was using a crudely carved diptych. They were fine as gifts, but I wouldn't want to drag him down into the mud like that.

"Alright, you wanted a wax store and a smithy, right? Let's go."

He took me to a store that sold wax and I requested that they pour wax into the concave inside of the board. I watched as they lined up the six boards my Dad made and poured in the wax. It didn't even take a minute. Waiting for the wax to harden took a lot longer.

"This's a simple job for us, but an odd one. What'll you be using these for?"

"Umm, (diptychs)." I talked to the older man behind the counter while waiting, but he couldn't really grasp what I wanted. Naturally, someone who didn't write much would find no need for a notepad. Which made me question whether diptychs would be a particularly successful product. *Well... looks like I might need to think of some other products.*

Once the wax hardened enough, we headed to the smithy. Witnessing Benno get what I wanted so easily reminded me of the importance of personal connections and wealth. This was a big step up from when I had just become Myne and had to rely entirely on trial and error.

"I'm Benno from the Gilberta Company. Is the foreman here?" We

headed to a smithy in the craftsman's alley and Benno opened the door before calling out inside. A wave of heat hotter than the summer sun came flowing out of the open door. That was natural since any smithy would be using fire, but it was still hot enough to make me jump with surprise.

I peered inside, my heart racing with thoughts of what might be inside, but it seemed that all the work was being done behind a tightly shut door that was radiating heat. Once the apprentice tending to the store disappeared into the back, the front area of the smithy had nothing but a counter for taking orders and a simple table with chairs. As I looked around the empty storefront, a massive man with arms thicker than my waist came out from the back, his great big bushy beard contrasting with the wispy strands of hair on his head. His large, wide eyes were kind of scary.

"Hey, Benno. What brings you here? More buttons for a noble?"

"Nah, not this time. This girl has an order for you."

"This little twerp? Hah, let's hear it!"

"U-Um! First, I want circular rings to connect two boards, like this." After I drew a picture of two boards being connected by rings and showed it to the foreman, he nodded.

"I also want (styluses)."

"You want what now?"

I erased the diptych drawing and drew the styluses I wanted. It was like a metal pen, but with a small pointed tip so as to dig letters into the wax, with the opposite tip flat to fill the letters back in. If possible, I also wanted a clip on it so it could be attached to the rings connecting the boards.

"I would like three of these."

"The heck are these? They're pretty tiny... Hey, Johann! Give these a shot." After staring at the stone slate for a bit, the foreman went to the back and called out for someone named Johann. Before long, a younger boy who couldn't be more than twenty, his bright orange hair tied behind his head.

"This is Johann, my apprentice. But don't let that fool ya, he's good with this kinda tiny stuff. Might as well be a master himself by now."

"I'm Johann, nice to meet you. What are you ordering today?"

I showed him the slate and gave him the same explanation I gave the foreman. Johann took out a board and started scratching out what looked like blueprints. His art was a lot neater than mine; just what I would expect from a professional.

"Just how small do you want the tip to be, exactly?"

"About as thin as a sewing needle, and please make the tip sharp and pointed. But it would be hard to hold if it was all that thin, so

please make the part where you hold it to be as thick as a normal pen.”

“Those aren’t very precise directions.” Johann set aside his pen with a sigh and went out back to retrieve several metal cylinders. He lined them up on the counter and asked me to try holding them.

“Which thickness is easiest for you to hold?”

“Umm, this one of me. What about you, Lutz?”

“If we’re talking about pens, this one would be easiest for me to write with.”

Lutz and I had different hand sizes, so the thickness and weight of an ideal pen differed significantly.



I looked up at Benno.

"I want one for Fran too, so could you pick one?"

"...This one. And make two of these. I want one too."

"Wha? But a (stylus) on its own isn't good for anything, it needs a diptych to write on. "

"I can make one of those later. Smithing takes time, so ordering it now will save time later."

I nodded and asked Johann for four. He nodded back at me and asked further questions.

"Can you describe the flat end more? What will you be using for? How wide do you want it? What about the angle here? What, exactly, is a 'clip'? You want to attach the things to the rings? Then the rings will have to be as thick as the clip. How long do you want them?" His questions were so precise it caught me off guard, but with this level of detail I was all but guaranteed a satisfactory result. That made me happy, so I answered each of his questions in turn.

Meanwhile, Benno and the foreman discussed Johann nearby. He was a brainy kid with an obsession for details, and his work was always perfect, but at the cost of speed. Not to mention that a lot of customers got annoyed at his deluge of questions. I appreciated his attention to detail, but apparently not many people out there shared the sentiment.

"Johann would have an easier life if he learned to loosen up and compromise a bit. But his work's so good 'cause he doesn't do that. I'm hoping to find a patron that can really make use of his talents. Any leads on that, Benno?"

Benno fell into thought, then glanced at me. But the foreman snorted, "Not the girl though, she's too much of a twerp. Can't be a patron 'til you're an adult and got enough money to support someone."

"You're not wrong." Benno cut the conversation short there, so I fell silent too.

But I mean... I am the forewoman of my own workshop, and I do have some money I can use for myself. I like Johann's attention to detail, so if I also like the finished product, I'll always come here when I need metal work done. Mhm.

"Hey, Myne. Don't doze off. If you're done ordering, we're going to a carpenter." Benno picked me up and strode out of the smithy. It seemed that Benno was determined to have his own diptych made.

Diptychs and Cards

We left the smithy and went to a carpentry workshop. It was a short walk since both were in the craftsman's alley. We passed by about three workshops before arriving at a large door with a carved design on the front, showing a chisel and a saw crossed in front of a large tree. Benno opened the door and walked in while still carrying me.

"I'm Benno from the Gilberta Company. Is the foreman here?"

"Sorry. The foreman is out right n— Wait, Myne?!"

"Oh, this is the workshop you work at, Sieg?"

There was a familiar face at the workshop. Lutz's second oldest brother Sieg, who was just the perfect height to make eye contact with me in Benno's arms, was standing with his jaw dropped.

"...You know this kid?"

"He's Lutz's older brother. Out of all three, he's the second oldest."

Benno set me down, at which point Sieg finally managed to notice Lutz. I could hear him whisper, "Is that really you, Lutz?"

Lutz always got changed in the room he was borrowing from the Gilberta Company. No doubt this was the first time Sieg had ever seen Lutz wearing his apprentice clothes with his hair brushed. He looked completely different wearing his work clothes than he did when wearing his normal clothes and hauling a basket to go to the forest and such.

"Hmph. Lutz's older brother, huh? I'm here to make an order. "

"O-One moment, please. I'll go get my supervisor." Sieg hurriedly dashed into the store, and after a moment's wait, a somewhat wider man came out.

"Heya, Benno. Welcome. What can I make for ya this time?"

Benno called for Lutz, who put the diptych I was making for Fran on the table. Benno then stated his order while pointing at it. "I want you to make a wood cover the same size as this. Put my store's crest on the front, and carve my name on the back."

The supervisor took out a low-tech tape measure and measured the diptych all over while writing measurements onto a board. As they began discussing what kind of wood to use, the spelling of his name, details of the crest, and the kind of lettering to use, Sieg popped back out to the front of the store, probably concerned about Lutz's

presence.

“Sieg, can I make an order too?”

“You, Myne...? Sure, I guess.”

“I want boards that are thin, but hard. All the same size, which should be about...” I started to estimate the size with my hands, so Sieg hurriedly went and got a tape measure. After deciding on the width and height, we determined the thickness. Then I told him, “I want seventy of these.”

“Seventy?! What do you need that many for?”

“Eheheh, I’m going to make (karuta) for the thirty-five letters of the alphabet.”

Gil and Delia were apprentice attendants. But they were illiterate, and apparently attendants needed to know how to read and write so they could do paperwork, write their master’s letters, and basically do a lot of things that Fran was doing for me. I could tell clear as day that Gil would get jealous if I gave Fran a gift but not him. When I thought about what gift I could get Gil, the first thing I tried to think of was something that would help him have fun learning to read.

Karuta were a kind of Japanese playing cards, and if I made them out of sturdy wooden boards, then all the kids in the orphanage could have fun playing with them. The orphans would have to learn to read eventually, so they might as well get a head start with something fun.

“Karu-what? Are you making something weird again?”

“Uh huh, I sure am. How long will it take?”

“...Won’t be too long, it’s basically just cutting them to be the same size.”

“Just cutting it won’t be enough. You need polish it so the corners and sides are smooth.”

“Like that hair stick of yours?”

I gave a big nod and Sieg scratched his head. Polishing each one individually would probably take a lot of time, but I wasn’t in that much of a hurry to finish the karuta boards.

“It’ll take about ten days for the other stuff I’m ordering to finish, so just finish them before then if you can.”

“Yeah? That’s plenty of time.”

“How about I pay twice as much for each board as I did for the hair sticks you made for us over the winter?”

“I’ll have to ask my supervisor about that. I’m not too good with prices,” said Sieg.

Sieg’s supervisor seemed to have finished his discussion with Benno a moment ago, and had been listening in on our conversation. “What’d he make for you before?”

“Sieg helped us make hair sticks for our winter handiwork. One middle copper each.”

“So that’d be two middle coppers each this time, huh? Not a bad price for a personal request, but it’s hard to say that’s a fair price for a workshop job, yeah?” The supervisor spoke with a grin, but I hadn’t actually offered a particularly low price. I knew the price of wood from buying lumber for our paper, and I knew the wages that craftsmen were paid.

Lutz must have noticed the same thing, because he looked at the supervisor with sharp eyes. “If we assume that this workshop’s handling fee is thirty percent, then given the price of wood and the pay of craftsmen, Myne’s offer was actually more than enough to cover this job. Especially since she’s not ordering just one, she’s ordering seventy. You’re looking down on Myne because she looks like a pre-baptism child, aren’t you?” finished Lutz with a smile closely resembling Mark’s, making the supervisor flinch.

“Lutz! What’re you doing?!”

“My job.”

Sieg yelled like he usually did when bullying Lutz at home, and Lutz replied without taking his eyes off the supervisor. It seemed that Benno and Mark had trained him extremely well, given that he could negotiate with an adult on equal terms. He had come so far from a year ago, when he wasn’t even able to read more than a few numbers and had rejoiced over learning to write his name. His growth was inspiring.

“Sieg, don’t interrupt, Lutz is negotiating with the supervisor right now. You just said you don’t understand prices much, didn’t you?” I threw Lutz a helping hand and Sieg looked between him and me with distress written on his face.

“But Myne, Lutz is... He’s...”

“He’s working really hard as an apprentice merchant. Just like you’re learning the skills necessary for your job, Lutz is leaning the wisdom and techniques necessary to be a merchant.”

In this world where practically all information had to be earned through direct communication, it was extremely rare for kids to successfully find jobs without their family’s help. I could imagine that Lutz’s family had continued to reject his employment without ever actually seeing him do his job. I was probably witnessing the first time any of them saw Lutz at work. Sieg looked at Lutz with a conflicted expression, like he wanted to say something but wasn’t able to.

“Sieg, why not be happy that Lutz is working hard and being successful?”

“.....”

Lutz and the supervisor ultimately settled on the price I had first suggested. Benno, who had been fondly regarding Lutz’s personal growth, lifted me up with one arm and used the other to ruffle Lutz’s

hair while walking out of the carpentry workshop. Over his shoulder, I could see Sieg frowning.

Ten days later, the styluses and the boards which would become karuta were finished. Naturally, the diptych frame Benno ordered was finished too. He took the ornately carved frame to his store, looking pleased, and poured wax into it to finish the job.

“So, Myne. How do you use this thing?” Benno held up his diptych, looking excited. Lutz was holding his own, and seemed interested too.

“These exist to make it easier to write notes on the go. You can write letters in the wax by using the stylus stuck to the rings. The frame is small enough to hold with one hand, and unlike paper, it’s firm enough to write on without pressing it against a surface. The good thing about diptychs is that you don’t need a servant holding ink following you around.”

Benno promptly held up the diptych with one hand and wrote on it. He carved into the wax with the pointed tip, leaving marks within. “...I get it. The marks stay in the wax.”

“That’s right, and they won’t go away when you close it, unlike how easy it is to accidentally rub the markings off of slates. But since there’s limited space, you should rewrite the notes on paper or boards once you get home. Once that’s done, you can use it again by smoothing out the wax... I think.” I had never actually used a diptych before, though I had read about them in books. They said that in the past, tax collectors had jotted notes on them while sitting on the backs of horses.

“Even if the wax inside starts breaking up, you can just dig it out and pour fresh wax inside. So... do you think these will be good products?”

“They’ll sell exclusively to merchants and nobles, since most commoners are illiterate. With that demographic in mind, we’ll need to work with a carpentry workshop that can deliver high-quality engravings. But the convenience of just being able to write on the spot without ink makes up for it.” Benno listed his thoughts on the diptych while stroking the engraving of his crest.

“Will they sell well?”

“Probably with merchants, but I don’t know about nobles. They have attendants carrying pens and ink at all times, after all. Though... no reason nobles wouldn’t buy them for their attendants, now that I think about it.”

“I actually thought of these while watching Fran work. The ones attendants use won’t need that much decoration, which should save on costs.”

“Alright, I’ll buy the rights.”

I promptly sold the rights to diptychs to Benno. The Myne Workshop couldn’t make them since they needed metal styluses, and in any case, I needed the money immediately.

“By the way, Myne. What’re you gonna use the boards for?” Benno asked about the boards currently stuffed haphazardly into a bag. The carpentry workshop didn’t offer any particular bagging services, so you brought your own bags to carry your order home. Once the karuta were done, it would probably be smart for me to ask Dad to make me a convenient carrying case.

“These are (karuta). They’re not finished yet; I’ll need to write on them first. Half of them will be picture cards, one for each letter of the alphabet, with the picture being something that has its name start with that letter. For example...”

I opened my diptych, drew a picture on the left side, then wrote the letter on the right side: a picture of a stylus and the letter S. That was basically half of what fully fledged karuta would be. I then added the line “Stylus: What you use to write on a diptych” beneath the letter.

I showed my creation to Benno proudly, but he looked at me with something closely resembling a horrified grimace. “...Are you planning on drawing all of these?”

“Yes? I don’t want to trust this to someone who isn’t familiar with karuta. After all, I intend to give them to Gil as a gift.” But for some reason, Lutz was cradling his head.

“Myne, let someone else take care of these. Especially the art. With skills like that nobody will even know what the drawings are supposed to be. Think about how Gil will feel getting these.”

“Yeah. Your handwriting’s great, but your art is awful,” Benno added.

Their merciless criticism made me gasp. I wasn’t that bad at drawing. At the very least, nobody had called me bad at art back in my Urano days.

“...M-My art’s not bad! It might look odd since I took some artistic liberties, but that’s what it means to be a trailblazer! The world will understand my talent sooner or later, it’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, you’re not fooling anybody. Give up and face the facts. You need to let someone else draw the art for you. Got it?”

I’m not bad...! I’m not!

Since I didn’t know whether Benno and Lutz’s appraisal of my art was accurate, I went to my temple chambers the next day and asked my attendants.

“...And that is what Benno told me,” I explained, showing Delia my art in the diptych. Her eyes widened.

“Well, it looks like he was right. Have you never seen a piece of art in your life before, Sister Myne?”

“Nah, she’s gotta have seen the art in the temple halls and stuff. She’s just bad at art, plain and simple.”

Delia and Gil launched spears through my heart. Wounded, I turned to Fran, only to seem him averting his gaze while furrowing his brows uncomfortably.

“...Well. In a manner of speaking, your art is very unique.”

My attendants had been raised in a temple where the chapel, halls, and so on were filled with high-class paintings and sculptures, not to mention the decorations in the blue priests’ rooms. To them art needed to be realistic and detailed, with my kind of cutesy simple art flying in the face of what they were used to.

“Sister Myne, might I suggest that you entrust the art to Wilma? She received art lessons from the blue shrine maiden she served in the past.”

“Really? Art lessons? Attendants can do art too?”

“...Different masters require different talents from their attendants.”

Upon being baptized, orphans became apprentice gray priests and began doing laundry, cleaning the chapel, sweeping the halls, and so on. During that time one might be chosen by an attendant to become an apprentice attendant thanks either to their hard work or the whims of circumstance. Once selected as an apprentice attendant, their home would move from the orphanage to the Noble’s Quarter. They would do work more or less like normal servants in the Noble’s Quarter while being taught by their elders how to become proper attendants.

“For that reason, all attendants are taught how to welcome visitors, but the exact details of their job depends on the priest or shrine maiden that they are serving.”

“Some apprentice shrine maidens are taught how to offer flowers,” chimed in Delia, “and some apprentice priests are taught to specialize in math.”

I nodded at their explanation, intrigued, and turned to Gil. Naturally, his opinion was the most important since the gift was ultimately for him. “What do you think, Gil? Should I ask Wilma?”

“Huh? Me? Why ask me?” Gil looked confused, so I explained that they would be a gift for him.

“...You snuck food to the orphanage children every day, didn’t you? You worked the hardest for them and I want to reward that.”

“A reward, huh? Eeeh...” Gil began to agonize over his answer the moment he learned the context. He blushed increasingly over time for some reason and ultimately cradled his head. “Guh. It’s too embarrassing, I can’t say anything...!” he mumbled to himself. He

even started groaning while walking in circles.

Maybe he had some *particular* feelings for Wilma. I watched on warmly, thinking that he was probably too embarrassed to go talk to her, until eventually he lifted his head with his resolve steeled.

"The art's fine with me either way. You should ask Wilma if you don't have the time, but yeah. All I want is that you write the letters, Sister Myne. 'Cause, your letters are pretty, and, uh... gah, aaaaah!" Unable to bear the embarrassment, Gil dashed out of the room and down the stairs. I heard the loud slam of a door being thrown shut. He was probably holing up in his room, trembling with embarrassment.

"...What do you think, Sister Myne?"

"I think that Gil is not used to giving praise, and him fighting against his embarrassment to praise me was very cute. I would thus like to dedicate my all to making this karuta set.."

"In that case, I advise asking Wilma to draw the art," said Fran while blatantly holding back a laugh, thereby deciding my course of action. The conversation trailed off and Fran started to get back to work, so I hurriedly called out to him.

"Wait, Fran. This is for you."

"...For me?"

I took out the diptych I had made for Fran. It was larger than mine so that it would be easier for him to hold, but they were still a matching pair.

"You have the most work out of any of us, don't you? You're my only adult attendant, but now you have a lot more work since I went and became the orphanage director. It must be really rough on you, and I'm grateful that you're working so hard for me. This is my way of rewarding you." I explained to Fran how to use the diptych, and when I told him that I had thought of making it after seeing Fran troubled at the gate, he smiled with his brown eyes crinkling.

"To think you would make a new product for me immediately after the idea struck you... I would like to master the management of your health soon, Sister Myne, so I might honor your gratitude."

I noticed Delia watching Fran hold the diptych, envy clear in her eyes. She was as easy to understand as ever. "These are for you, Delia," I said. "You didn't go to the orphanage, but you've worked hard keeping the first floor clean and greeting visitors while Fran and Gil were busy."

"What are they?"

"A stone slate and a slate pen. Please practice the alphabet with them. Attendants need to learn to write letters for their masters, do they not?" I wrote Delia's name on the slate and handed it to her. She pored over the letters with her eyes locked on the slate. I had thought that she might be somewhat literate compared to Gil, but it looked

like she might not have been taught any of the alphabet at all while with the High Bishop.

“This is your name, Delia. You should start practicing by writing your name. Okay?”

Some time passed and Gil finally calmed down and came out of his room, so I gave him his stone slate and slate pen too. He immediately began competing with Delia over who could learn to read faster, and with their enthusiasm inspiring me, I began writing out the karuta while paying close attention to each letter. I selected exclusively words related to gods and the bible so that Wilma with her temple upbringing would have an easier time drawing the art.

When Benno saw the finished product with my letters and Wilma’s art, he immediately wanted to buy the rights to karuta, but I wanted to make karuta sets in the Myne Workshop for the kids. So even though Benno would normally buy total rights to a product so he could have full control, this time I made him incorporate that the Myne Workshop could continue making them, plus a thirty percent cut of profits for the idea. That meant that from now on I would earn some money each time a karuta set was sold.

I let out a sigh of relief with the knowledge that my metaphorical wallet would soon be heavier. Entertainment products and educational tools might sell pretty well.

Preparing for the Star Festival

I had plans to visit Corinna today so that I could order spare blue robes and a set of ceremonial robes. I initially ordered the ceremonial robes through Benno since they would take time to make, but apparently she needed to talk to me directly to discuss embroidery patterns, the type of sash, the payment, and so on.

This time, Corinna said I could bring my mother or sister with me. She was pregnant and could use the help taking measurements. Benno had measured me over my clothes before, but since it seemed that we would have a long business relationship with each other, she wanted to start getting proper measurements of me sooner rather than later. To that end, I was bringing Tuuli with me while Lutz stayed at home. Mom was a little sick, and although she wanted to come with us, Dad put his foot down.

“Ceremonial clothes use really good cloth, don’t they? I’ve never seen cloth that’s this soft and silky before!” Tuuli touched the cloth with sparkling eyes after taking off my clothes and measuring me. The workshop she worked at didn’t get orders for clothes that needed such fine cloth. In my case, I was using the high-quality cloth Benno gave the temple. It was originally white, but I had already given it to my Mom to dye blue at the dyeing workshop where she worked. It was now a deep blue resembling lapis lazuli, which matched the color of my hair well.

“Myne, you can put your clothes back on now. Tuuli, thank you for your help. The ceremonial robes will be embroidered with the words of a prayer. When the light shines on them, the gold and silver will shine beautifully.” On top of that, the front of the neck would have a crest sewn onto it. Most nobles used their family crests, but I was using my workshop’s crest since I didn’t have a family one.

“This is your crest, Myne?”

“Uh huh. This is a book. This is pen with a jar of ink. There’s also wood, symbolizing paper, and the flower hairpins I made. I thought up my own crest, but Benno made me add a lot of other things.”

“Come on, Myne. You probably made something weird that he had to fix.”

“...Mean. He just said it was too simple, that’s all.”

Corinna giggled at our conversation while spreading the blue cloth across the table. The lustrous piece of cloth covered the whole

table, rippling like the ocean.

“In normal cases, the creation of ceremonial clothing begins with the selection of thread and weaving techniques to bring rise to certain designs on the cloth. But this time, we are using preexisting cloth because there is not enough time to begin from scratch. I believe I would like to embroider the cloth with thread of the same color such that a design arises when the light strikes it, but what design might you like, Myne?”

When asked what design I wanted woven directly into the cloth, I first thought of a kimono. Maybe she was talking about making a damask similar to the classical Japanese rinzu, often used in kimonos of the Edo period. Still, even considering that the outfit would be much smaller than an adult’s due to my short height, those robes needed large swaying sleeves that necessitated a large body of cloth. Embroidering it all wouldn’t take as long as weaving cloth from scratch, but it would still require a lot of work.

“Um, Mrs. Corinna. I actually haven’t looked closely at any pieces of ceremonial clothing before, and I don’t have any ideas for designs I might want. But if you’re going to be embroidering all this cloth, the simpler the better, I think.” I probably saw ceremonial clothing at my own baptism, but my memories were dominated by the praying pose and stumbling upon the book room. I remembered the bible that the High Priest had, but not the fancy clothes he’d been wearing.

“Myne, a noble’s ceremonial clothes can’t be simple!” Tuuli insisted. “They’ll look down on you for being a commoner and stuff.”

“But embroidering it all really will be a lot of work. Don’t you think a simple design would make it a lot easier?” As I desperately tried to calm Tuuli’s indignation, Corinna put a hand on her cheek.

“It would be nice if I could make simple embroidery appear elegant, as you made Tuuli’s baptism outfit appear fancy through simple adjustments. Do you perchance have any ideas on how to do that, Myne?” asked Corinna, leading me to search through my memories. A more broad design would necessitate less work than an intricate design that required precise sewing.

“...What about putting flowers on flowing water? Umm, like, the water would be curving lines like this, with flowers here and there. You can make the design look fancier while minimizing the actual embroidery done by putting more space between the water lines and scattering flower petals... Probably.” I drew wavy lines on my slate, making them thick at times and thin at others to approximate flowing water, then added flowers with five heart-shaped petals here and there before scattering a bunch of tiny hearts at random places.

“I believe that I will design a more elegant flower, but the flow of water is quite nice. I see that you truly are my brother’s Goddess of

Water,” said Corinna with an amused smile, causing me to flinch. No matter how much Benno and I denied it, nobody would believe us if even his little sister Corinna was joking about it.

“...Um, Mrs. Corinna. How far has that rumor spread?”

“Otto is spreading it because he finds it hilarious, so I have no idea.”

Otto, you big idiot! Benno’s going to get so mad at you!

As I ate the lunch that Corinna ordered for me, she and Tuuli had a rousing discussion on what flowers to adorn the water flow with. I couldn’t keep up at all, since I didn’t know the names of too many flowers.

“Mrs. Corinna,” said Tuuli, “it looks like Mr. Benno wants to come inside...”

“Hate to interrupt your lunch, Corinna, but I’ve got something to give to Myne. Mind if I borrow her for a second?”

“Not at all. Myne finished eating long ago and has seemed bored ever since.”

Benno gestured me forward, so I jumped off my chair and walked to him. “Read this when you’re alone. That’s all. If you notice any solutions to the problems, do me a favor and speak up,” he said while handing me a sheet of paper. Once I had it, he casually lifted a hand in farewell and returned to the store. *Um, what?*

I looked around to make sure no one was close to me, then immediately opened up the folded piece of paper. On it was a list of problems Benno was in the process of struggling with.

“W-Wait, seriously? First there’s a list of insults and warnings for him to throw at me, and now there’s a list of problems for me to solve? I don’t want to deal with this...”

The list had everything from trivial things, like Otto being too happy about Corinna’s pregnancy to focus on his work, to business matters like the decoration, menu, service style, and prices of the Italian restaurant. I went through each problem one by one while thinking of answers for Benno. Then, I reached the final problem — and the blood drained from my face.

“Myne, what did he want? What’s on that paper?” I must have been standing in place for a long time, because Tuuli came over to peer at the letter with a worried expression. I hurriedly folded the paper, but then realized that Tuuli was illiterate and sighed in relief. The list of problems might as well have been lines of squiggles to her.

“It’s a work secret.” I quickly put the folded paper in my bag while evading Tuuli’s curiosity. I tried thinking of a solution to the final problem, but nothing came to me immediately.

Benno had said he would take Lutz to another city after securing a location for another workshop, and I never questioned that he would.

It didn't occur to me at all that Lutz's dad might not give him permission to go. Lutz had faith in Benno just like I did. Every time he saw Benno coming back from another city, he asked with sparkling eyes if he had found a place for the workshop yet. Benno couldn't just go and tell him that they could leave the day his father gave him permission. That would send irreparable ruptures through Lutz's family life.

After all, Lutz didn't know how to convince his dad to change his mind. As Tuuli and Corinna agreed on putting flowers for each season in the embroidery and shifted the discussion to whether to order them vertically or horizontally, I cradled my head alone.

"Y'know, it's about time for the Star Festival."

"Bwuh?! Wh-Where, what?"

Lutz spoke to me on the way to the temple, causing me to jump in surprise and look around. He narrowed his eyes and peered at me. It was enormously difficult for me to keep secrets from Lutz, since he had been managing my health for so long. That was definitely the only reason he was suspicious.

"What's with you, Myne? Your head's been in the clouds all day."

"Not true! I just, um... What did you say again?"

Lutz sighed, having seen through my denial that my mind was somewhere else, and then repeated himself. "The Star Festival. It's almost here. Want to go together this year?"

"The Star Festival...? Oh, that summer thing? It's about playing with water, isn't it?"

"Not exactly. We throw taue fruits at each other."

Taue fruits were those tiny red fruits I saw back in the spring. They filled up with water in the summer, so much that they got to be the size of a fist. I understood it as kind of a natural water balloon, but I had never seen a swollen one myself.

"What kind of festival is the Star Festival, if it's not just about playing with water?"

Since I had missed the festival every time and knew nothing about it, Lutz explained it for me. The Star Festival wasn't about playing with water; it was a day where marriages were held. It was basically a wedding ceremony for all couples held in the lower city once a year, and the taue were thrown at those getting married.

"When second bell rings, everyone who isn't in the wedding goes to the forest to pick up taues. The wedding starts on third bell and ends on fourth bell. That's when all the new married couples start going home. Everyone else waits in the central plaza and hides with their taues."

I mentally envisioned a huge group of people walking down the

main road with water balloons in their hands. It was surreal. Beyond me, really. But it was commonplace for cultures to have wedding ceremonies that appeared odd from the outside. Back on Earth I had read books about wedding ceremonies where the attendees all had fistfights, or barged in on the marriage being consummated. I had even read about one culture where the lord of a region got to consummate all marriages. It would be wise to just think of the Star Festival as an oddity in a long string of oddities.

“So, once all the married couples reach the central plaza, a bell rings and the battle begins. We all start throwing our taues at the couples.

“What?! At the married couples?!”

“Yep. The husband protects the wife while they run away. It’s like testing his worth as a man. Most of the couples end up hit with a lot of fruit and throw some back while running around the city sopping wet.”

The festival was more bizarre than I had expected. Japan itself had some odd marriage traditions, like exchanging strange gifts, but it all had meaning. Maybe there was some deep symbolic meaning to a city-wide water balloon fight that I just didn’t get, like the seeds of the fruit symbolizing fertility or something.

“But y’see, the people who throw the taue fruit the hardest are the people who didn’t manage to get married that year. They hunt after the couples like crazy every time. It’s messed up, but pretty funny too.”

Aaah, I can understand that. Feelings of empathy arose in my heart. Even back in my Urano days, there was barely any romance in my life. Dating, marriage, it was all outside of my world. I could understand very well the desire to throw fruit at newlyweds leaving a church with happy smiles on their faces.

“...Okay, I understand the festival now, Lutz. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Uh... You sure got real motivated real fast. Anyway, once all the couples get chased away, we all eat the celebratory food prepared at the plaza. That’s when kids go home, happy to have eaten so much. They’re not allowed to go back out, no matter what. ‘Cause that’s when the beer comes out and it’s time for an adults-only festival.”

As one might expect from a festival with “star” in the name, the most important part of it took place at night. Once the kids were driven out of the picture, the newlyweds returned and were enthusiastically celebrated while the unmarried people sought out romantic partners. According to Lutz, that was always a source of frustration for those born in summer, as they had their adulthood ceremony taking place not long after the Star Festival.

“Do you think the kids from the orphanage go to the festival too?”

“Who knows? Don’t think I’ve ever seen them there. Actually... do you think you’ll be busy at the temple? I remember something about a ceremony in fall you gotta go to. You sure we can go to the Star Festival together?” asked Lutz with worry, but I didn’t have an answer for him. Given that the mass wedding was held in the temple, it was very possible I would have work to do.

“...I’m not sure, but I’ll ask the High Priest.”

When we arrived at the temple, Lutz left to go back to the store. After seeing him off, I changed in my room and started writing a request to meet the High Priest while asking Fran about the Star Festival.

“Fran, have you ever participated in the Star Festival?”

“Star Festival is an incorrect term. It is the Starbind Ceremony. Is it not a ceremony where marriages are blessed?”

Fran explained that in the temple, it was called the Starbind Ceremony, and that it was deeply rooted within religious history, honoring the God of Darkness blessing the marriage between the God of Life and the Goddess of Earth. It was originally held at night, a time when it was easier to receive the God of Darkness’s divine protection, and even now it was held at night in the Noble’s Quarter. The ceremony for nobles and commoners used to be held at the same time, but when the population grew too large for that, the commoners began holding their ceremony during the day.

“If the God of Darkness’s blessings are relevant here, shouldn’t it be held during the winter, when the nights are longer?”

“Sister Myne, the God of Darkness permitted the marriage in the summer, and as there is the Offering Ceremony in the winter, there would be no priests to offer blessings.”

Fran’s explanation was understandable, and honestly, the thought of a wedding in the middle of the winter gave me literal chills. I had suggested it myself, but on second thought, it would be hard to attend a wedding when buried in the snow.

“Now that I think about it, reaching the temple in the middle of a blizzard would be unreasonable, and considering how new families will need to prepare their homes for winter, marrying before the fall is practical. It’s nice that since everyone has the same anniversary, no husbands have to worry about mixing things up and ticking off their wife.”

And with that, I finished the letter. “Fran, could you deliver this letter to the High Priest? I want to ask him about what the orphanage does during the Starbind Ceremony and what I might need to do myself.”

Despite the fact that I was meeting the High Priest every morning to do paperwork, even the slightest of consultations needed advance notice through letters. It was a pain, but I was gradually getting used to it. There were a lot of minor questions I had that could be resolved in a single reply to a letter. In any case, both Fran and the High Priest firmly told me not to speak recklessly when other people were around.

I had been prepared to wait several days for the meeting, but the moment the High Priest read over the letter, he cradled his head and beckoned me into the hidden room. I meekly followed him there, not really understanding why my request for a meeting had frustrated him.

“You don’t mind meeting me without advance notice?” I asked right after entering the hidden room, only to be met with a sharp glare. Normally he would simply offer harsh criticism with a collected expression, but in this room he would lecture me with his frosty wrath. I preferred to be in his normal room when he was mad.

“You fool. The Starbind Ceremony is the day after tomorrow. It would be over by the time I sent a letter of invitation.”

“Someone just said it was soon, so I thought I had more time...”

“I had been postponing it due to the fact we were progressing steadily through my built-up paperwork, but I see that your education can wait no longer.”

If he wasn’t certain before, the High Priest now knew for a fact that my ignorance of all temple matters remained as consistent as ever. That was bad. I felt danger crackling in the air. It was a well-known rumor between priests in the orphanage that becoming the High Priest’s attendant meant undergoing extreme blood-curdling training, and I got the feeling that I was about to learn first hand whether that was true. I looked away, and out of the corner of my eye saw the High Priest shaking his head with exasperation.

“Good grief. To answer your question, the Starbind Ceremony is a ceremony for adults. As you are still an apprentice, you cannot participate. Stay at the orphanage, and as director, keep careful watch so that no orphans leave. Many citizens will enter and leave the temple during the ceremony. As there will be blue priests servicing the weddings in order to receive donations in return, you must absolutely ensure that not a single orphan interrupts.”

He told me to stay in the orphanage, which made me panic a little. I wanted to participate in the Star Festival and throw taues, not stay stuck up in the orphanage all day.

“Um, I want to participate in the lower city’s Star Festival instead. Is that okay?”

“And the lower city’s Star Festival is?” The High Priest raised an eyebrow slightly.

“It’s a festival where kids go to the forest to collect taue fruit in the morning, then throw them at each other in the afternoon.”

“...What in the world? How does that have anything to do with the Starbind Ceremony?”

“I don’t really know. I couldn’t go last year due to a Devouring fever, and I couldn’t go any of the years before that since I was never healthy back in those days, so I’ve never participated. I’ve really been looking forward to going for the first time this year, so...”

The High Priest’s eyebrows furrowed deeply. It was an expression teetering between rejection and sympathy, him wanting to tell me no but sympathizing with how I had never been able to participate before now.

“...Would it really be so bad for me to go? I think it would actually be a lot quieter here if you let all the orphanage kids go out for the festival.”

“That would be fine during the morning, but what about the afternoon? There will be fruits flung everywhere, will there not? Sending the orphans out to the city during that time will cause unnecessary conflict. The blue priests will be going to the Noble’s Quarter in the afternoon and there needs to be someone to bear responsibility.”

It seemed that once the morning ceremony ended, the blue priests and their attendants left the temple to attend the Starbind Ceremony in the Noble’s Quarter. I clapped my hands together with a sudden realization. *...If nobody’s around who would care, can’t we just play in the temple grounds?*

“High Priest, what would you say to everyone at the orphanage gathering fruit in the morning, then throwing them at each other exclusively within the orphanage? I want the kids to experience the festival as well. I was looking forward to it myself, too...”

The High Priest lowered his eyes in thought, then slowly raised his gaze back up to me. “Clean up after yourselves thoroughly. If you don’t cause enough of a stir for the citizens to notice, you may do as you like.”

“I thank you ever so much.”

As soon as noon came, we held a briefing session in the orphanage. We could do as we liked so long as the blue priests didn’t find us, so after finishing their chapel cleaning early in the morning, they would change into their forest clothes and wait for Lutz and me. Once we were there, we would stealthily sneak out and head to the forest to gather taues.

The orphans were overjoyed since they normally spent the day of the festival stuck in the orphanage, but the gray priests couldn’t go

with them since they needed to prepare carriages for the blue priests and stand guard at the gate. They watched the excited kids with envy.

“All of those jobs last only until the festival ends, correct? The throwing will begin when the blue priests and their attendants leave for the Noble’s Quarter, so we can start once everyone’s finished their jobs. It’ll be better if everyone has fun together. You can all wait until the priests have finished their jobs, can’t you?” I asked the kids, and they all nodded hard in reply.

“Uh huh! We’ll wait!”

“I’ll bring lots of extra fruit for the people who couldn’t come.”

The busy gray priests and the kids ultimately came to a compromise, where the kids agreed to wait to start the throwing and the gray priests prepared food for dinner. Unbelievably, they normally went without dinner on the day of the Starbind Ceremony, since they didn’t get food without nobles there.

“I’ll ask my chef to make plenty of food for all.”

After returning to my room, I told Hugo and Ella through Fran that they could leave work on fourth bell on the day of the Starbind Ceremony, but in return I wanted them to make dinner on top of lunch. It seemed that Hugo was an unwed adult and thus had a burning desire to participate in the festival. Fran told me he that he was determined to finish his work as soon as possible.

...I missed my own opportunity to throw fruit at newlyweds, but as long as the kids in the orphanage got to have fun, that was fine by me.

The Star Festival

It was the day of the Star Festival. The sun was in the sky, but it was still early enough that the summer heat hadn't fully set in. A stir that only festivals could bring was already running through the city and crowds of people were heading for the south and east gates, despite the fact it was so early that the gates hadn't opened yet.

"Bye, Mom!"

"Don't get too excited out there, dear. As always, Lutz, please take good care of Myne for me."

I left home with Lutz, who had come to get me. Tuuli came with us at first, but left to enjoy the festival with her own friends. She was running toward the gate with Ralph and Fey.

"Bye, Myne. Let's have fun today!"

"Uh huh. Bye, Tuuli."

After waving Tuuli, Ralph, and Fey goodbye, Lutz and I turned around and walked in opposition to the flow of people, heading toward the temple. We were wearing our normal clothing so that we could safely get wet. People popping out of side alleys were walking to the gate with excitement sparkling in their eyes. Not a single person was wearing their best clothing.

Fighting against the waves of people, we passed the central plaza and headed further north. It was about there that the crowds thinned. One could guess that those living in the north had left long ago to reach the gates as they opened.

"You're staying at the orphanage, Myne."

"Wha? Why?!" I, having intended to go with everyone to the forest and pick up taues, looked up at Lutz with wide eyes. He grimaced uncomfortably before continuing.

"If it were just you and me going to the festival, I was gonna get two or three taues before heading back. But we're all gonna throw them at each other in the orphanage instead of at newlyweds, yeah? That means we'll need more. We won't make it back to the temple by fourth bell with you with us."

Lutz's argument was rock solid and forced me to hang my head sadly. As always, I hated my body for making me dead weight to everyone. Lutz patted my head to comfort me while lowering his voice a bit.

“Not to mention, someone might drop by the orphanage to check up on things. You’ll want to be there if that happens, right? As director?”

“Ngh... You’re not wrong.” It was very likely that the High Priest or High Bishop would send an attendant to check on the orphanage and give warnings. If the High Bishop were to learn that the orphanage was empty, he would probably have strong words — or worse — for both me and the High Priest.

“You’re not the only one staying behind to work, yeah? You stick with them while we get the taues. I can’t help if you don’t.”

“...Okay. I’ll stay behind.”

The second bell rang across the city just as we reached the temple. It was time for the gates to open. Fran and I watched as Lutz left the orphanage through the back entrance with a finger over his lips to signal that they should be quiet. The guard at the gate could barely hold back his laughter, and the same went for me. Once they got past the gate they ran off from the temple, chattering excitedly. I went to my chambers, feeling envious, and changed into my blue robes so that I could go to the orphanage.

“Did you not want to go to the forest, Delia?”

“Going to the forest won’t help me be a good mistress. I want to learn the alphabet as soon as possible.”

Gil and Delia were competing to learn the alphabet first, but Gil was learning faster. Probably because he was bringing his karuta to the orphanage and playing with everyone.

“Understandable. You are losing to Gil, after all.”

“Geez! Just by a little bit! I’ll beat him in no time!”

Delia had stayed behind by choice, and so I left her to watch over the chefs while Fran and I went to the orphanage. After climbing down the stairs, I saw that the door to the kitchen was thrown open and I could see Hugo and Ella cooking furiously, attempting to finish everything before fourth bell so they could join the others in the taue throwing.

“The High Priest has requested that I spend this morning instructing you on the rituals and ceremonies of the temple. You will not be able to participate in the taue throwing until you have memorized them all.”

“Guuuh...”

The High Priest apparently had no mercy when it came to education and had immediately developed a curriculum for me. I had to learn a surprising amount today.

As I slumped in despair at everything written on the board, Fran informed me that the High Priest had estimated from my math skills and degree of literacy that my academic level was high enough to

justify this rapid pace. But the High Priest misunderstood. My math skills were carried over from my past life, and I had worked hard on becoming literate exclusively because it was necessary to read books. He shouldn't expect those talents to carry over to memorizing a bunch of temple ceremony stuff. I wasn't that good of a student.

I turned down the hall on my way to the orphanage and there, by chance, I came face to face with a blue priest for the first time. He must have been heading to prepare for the ceremony.

"Well well, if it isn't that little upstart commoner, wearing her blue robes without an ounce of shame. Today's ceremony is no place for kids, you know."

"Rather than participating in the ceremony, the High Priest has given me the duty of watching over the children in the orphanage."

"Oh, I see. Taking care of orphans is a good fit for a commoner like you. Maybe you do know your place after all."

"I thank you ever so much for your praise."

The blue priest gave a bored "hmpf" and left. I resumed walking to the orphanage. Fran furrowed his brows with concern and spoke to me, sounding worried.

"Er, Sister Myne. That was..."

"Don't worry about it, Fran. Words will never hurt me. They go in one ear and out the other, no harm done."

I entered the orphanage and saw that there were a few gray shrine maidens still there. As one would expect from shrine maidens who had been left in the temple as potential flower bearers, they were pretty with shapely faces.

"Oh my, Sister Myne. What might bring you here?"

They turned gracefully my way and tilted their heads. Each move they made was thoroughly refined, and they all looked much more like rich young ladies than I did.

"I decided to stay here, since someone needs to be here to deal with anyone who might drop by. Do you girls have work today?"

"No, we simply do not have much interest in the forest, so we were discussing whether we would like to make soup instead."

I found a familiar face among the gray shrine maidens. She was a young girl around fifteen with her blonde hair, close to a bright orange, bound up tightly behind her head. Well, given that she had her hair up, she was technically an adult. But her face was so young looking that "girl" was the only word that came to mind.

"Wilma, thank you for drawing the art for the karuta. They were wonderful."

Wilma's eyes, which were light brown and always had a tinge of mirth to them, crinkled happily. If she looked bright before, she was outright radiant now. "Truly, I should be thanking you for affording

me the opportunity to draw once again. It had been so long since I held a pen that my heart jumped with joy. The children seemed very interested in the karuta, as you call them, but I do not suppose they were for the orphanage.”

“They were a gift for my attendant. But if you would draw another set, I can order more boards for the children.” I could order the boards and write the letters myself, but my art style was so different from this place’s that everyone around me did their darndest to stop me from drawing. Wilma’s help was essential for making karuta.

“Oh my, certainly! I would be ever so grateful if you did.” Wilma beamed a smile. She was overflowing with passion for art and love for the children. It had been Wilma who rushed to clean the children in the basement before anyone else. When I promised to make a set of karuta just for the orphanage children, the girl beside Wilma lowered her eyes sadly.

“If only I could draw like Wilma, I too could be useful...”

“But my, Rosina, do your talents not lie in music?”

Rosina, the girl with the mature, pretty face who had just sighed regretfully, seemed to be skilled in playing instruments. Talk about elegant. I wanted to hear Rosina’s music, but apparently her former master had taken her instruments with her, leaving Rosina without anything to play. I wanted to buy one for her, but instruments were expensive even back in Japan, so it wasn’t hard to imagine that a good instrument would be astronomical in price here.

“Fran. Are instruments expensive?”

“It would be better to ask Master Benno that, but regardless, it is required for blue shrine maidens to be trained in music.”

“If you wish to learn, Sister Myne, I believe that we could be of assistance. If you would have us, we will gratefully be your attendants.”

Rosina had served the same blue apprentice shrine maiden that Wilma had. The apprentice was quite taken with all forms of art and kept her attendants thoroughly separated between those who did work and those who appreciated culture with her. Rosina and the others spent each day polishing their singing, music, dance, poetry, art, and so on.

...*Ngh*. I spent about three years practicing piano, but I never touched another instrument outside of music class. But there were probably no recorders or melodicas here, and I doubted they would let me pass off castanets as my instrument of choice.

Not only did I have to study paperwork and matters related to the temple, I also had to go through classical training in music and the arts. I was starting to think I had been a little too hasty with becoming

an apprentice blue shrine maiden. Just a little.

"In any case, Sister Myne. We will be off making the soup if you need us." Wilma and the others went to make the soup, leaving Fran and me alone in the orphanage dining hall.

"So, Fran. What would you think if I said I wanted to take Wilma as an attendant? Would the High Priest give his permission?"

"Might I ask why?"

"Wilma is good at art, isn't she? The karuta are one thing, but there are a lot of other ideas I have that will need art to make a reality. I want to secure her for myself before any other blue priest takes her. Plus, I think a cultured adult gray shrine maiden will be important for me."

"I believe that the High Priest will in all likelihood grant his permission. But as Wilma takes care of the young children more than anyone else, I am uncertain what will happen to them if she is taken away from the orphanage."

"I see. I'll ask Wilma what she thinks later and figure something out then."

Third bell rang as Fran lectured me on the temple's ceremonies. It got pretty noisy outside not long after. The couples had come to the temple for the Starbind Ceremony. I wanted to go see, but naturally, I couldn't.

I worked on finishing my quota with my heart fluttering, and before I knew it fourth bell had rung. That signified the end of the Starbind Ceremony and the bustle slowly grew distant. Once it was completely silent, the children quietly returned from the back entrance. I could see them stealthily climbing the stairs while holding their mouths and stepping gently.

"Welcome back, everyone. Did you gather lots of taues?"

"Sister Myne, shhhh!" After being reminded not to speak, I hurriedly closed my mouth. Only after Lutz came inside, shut the back entrance to the basement, and lifted his hand did everyone start talking.

"We got lots and lots!"

"We put all our baskets by the basement. Lunch is first, right?"

"Indeed it is. You should all wash your hands and wait for the divine gifts to be delivered. I will briefly return to my room."

Since Lutz was here, I went back to my chambers — not through the hall, but through the basement. I climbed down the stairs, where I saw baskets filled with the taues everyone had gathered.

"Lutz, can I borrow four of the taues you gathered? My chefs couldn't go to the forest, and I want to give them some."

"Yeah, sure." I returned to my chambers through the back entrance with Fran carrying the taue fruit, whereupon I saw Hugo and

Ella waiting outside the kitchen impatiently, having already finished preparing lunch. Through Fran, I gave the two of them two taues each.

“I thank you both ever so much for working on the day of the festival. It isn’t much, but please accept these fruits.”

“Wha?! Really?! Thank you!”

I felt Hugo dash away the moment I turned my back. Just how much had he been looking forward to the Star Festival? And who did he intend to throw those taues at? I heard Ella yell out “Hugo, please!” out of consideration for me, but I had newfound social awareness and knew to climb the stairs without turning around.

I ate lunch, which was delivered by Delia, on the second floor with Lutz. Today’s dish was faux capellini. I had them chop plain pasta as thin as possible, then for the tomato sauce and mozzarella, I selected pome sauce and a kind of cheese with a mild flavor. To emulate basil sauce, I prepared plant oil with salt and either herbs or rigars (faux garlic), hoping that one of the two would give me what I wanted.

We also had a salad with seasonal vegetables and steamed chicken. In truth I was really in the mood for cold somen noodles, but as always my hands were tied by the apparent lack of Japanese-like ingredients here.

“You sure worked hard today, Lutz. Eat as much as you want. Everyone looks so happy and excited thanks to you. I’m really grateful.”

“Yeah, we went in hard. Some kids went so far in the forest looking for more I thought we weren’t gonna make it back in time.”

“That sounds so fun. I wish I got to see the festival. I was stuck here studying with Fran the whole morning.” Hearing the orphans talk excitedly about how they had seen people hiding with taue fruit on their way back to the temple made me endlessly jealous.

“Hey, Myne. Want to go check out the festival just for a second? The newlyweds are probably all gone by now, so we won’t be throwing fruit or anything. Just seeing what the city looks like right now. The kids gotta eat after we’re done with lunch, so there’s some time, yeah?”

Divine gifts were given to attendants after the blue priests had finished, and there were some gray priests no doubt still preparing carriages, so we still had some time before everyone was ready to throw fruit.

“Yeah! Let’s go!”

I took off my blue robes to return to my normal outfit, then dashed out of the temple gate with Lutz. The soaked city streets glistened beneath the summer sun. The ground near the temple wasn’t

wet at all, but the further south we went, the more soaked our feet got. Just how many taue fruit had people thrown to get the streets wet enough that not even the summer sun could evaporate the water?

That train of thought was followed by the sight of kids running down the street and laughing, soaked from head to toe with water dripping from their heads. They were heading toward some loud hustle and bustle further south.

“Let’s follow them, Lutz!”

“Don’t get too close, alright?”

Following Lutz’s advice, I stealthily watched them from the shadows and saw that there was a huge, chaotic battle underway in a somewhat narrow alleyway. There were no foes or allies; there were merely stalwart heroes, throwing taues while shouting meaningless battle cries. Their shouts were loud, amplified and echoing off the walls of the alley.

Everyone was soaked to the bones. Naturally, young women wearing light summer clothing had their outfits clinging tightly to their bodies, turning transparent in the worst cases. Many of the men were running around shirtless, as if their shirts clinging to them had gotten to be more annoying than they were worth.

...Oof, this is like the kind of celebration people throw when their favorite football or baseball team wins a championship.

“Gah?!” Lutz suddenly yelled as water exploded on his head. The drops of cold water splattered on me too, and when I turned around I saw a bunch of kids behind Lutz, taues held at the ready.

“Hey, we found some kids that aren’t wet at all!”

The kids yelled out and immediately the huge crowd stopped their chaotic war to look our way. Their eyes shone like those of a hunter who had just found their prey, which sent a shudder down my spine. A weak cry leaked from my mouth and I felt myself shrink.

“Run, Myne! Avoid as many as you can!”

“But I can’t avoid any!” He should know better than to expect me to do anything requiring agility. All I could do was lift my arms and try to block any direct blows to my face. Lutz took my hand and ran, smacking down a taue thrown our way. The taue, which really was swollen like a water balloon, exploded after hitting the ground. It was a nice save that made me sigh in relief, but Lutz blocking it just made our hunters more eager for victory.

“They dodged it! Cheeky little brats!”

“Get’m, everyone!”

And so taue after taue came crashing down on us. They even felt like water balloons, so they didn’t hurt even when thrown at full force, but the cold water running down my spine and the sensation of the fruit bursting against my back sent goosebumps rising up all over

my body.

“Gyaaah! So cold! They’re so cold!”

“Myne, just move your legs!”



Lutz only managed to block the first thrown taue. There was no way to avoid them once adults joined the fray. We were surrounded in no time, powerless against their greater numbers. There was no hope of escape and no way of dodging them all. We were doomed the moment we drew the attention of the high-spirited festival goers, and we were soaked in seconds.

“Ahaha! Not a bad job for a twerp, you almost saved her!”

“Can’t wait to see what a hero he grows up to be, huh?”

Cackling, the adults praised Lutz for his efforts in protecting me before rushing off like a storm in search of their next victims.

“...Lutz, I’m definitely going to get sick now.” I grasped at my dripping wet skirt and shook my head, making water fly off of me while Lutz nodded.

“Effa might get super mad and say you can’t go to next year’s festival.”

“...Well, I know what it’s like now. I know it all too well. I don’t think I really want to go to a festival that’s guaranteed to get me sick,” I said while wringing my hair to squeeze out the water.

Lutz and I did our best to dry ourselves off as we returned to the temple. The north of the city seemed more invested in the upcoming feast than the taue throwing, and preparations were already beginning at various plazas with wells. Boards were set on boxes to form makeshift tables while others brought food from somewhere.

“Man, I wish I were hungry enough for some of that.”

“Uh huh, we just ate, didn’t we?”

The people throwing taues and running all over the city would no doubt realize how empty their stomachs were once they started seeing food.

“Geez! What in the world?! Look at you! Wait outside until the bath is ready, you’re making the room filthy!” Delia yelled at me before Mom got the opportunity to. Lutz murmured that she was scarier than Effa and I agreed with a slight nod.

As we waited outside the door for the bath to be finished, Fran appeared wearing his used forest clothes in preparation for the upcoming water battle. Upon seeing us soaking wet, he began rubbing his temples.

“Sister Myne, the orphans have already finished preparing. You might as well go as you are. Delia, prepare the bath to be ready for when she returns.”

Delia was sitting out the taue throwing because it wasn’t “dignified.” Gil had already gone to the orphanage a while ago.

“The gray priests who had been preparing the carriages for the

blue priests have sent word that all the blue priests and their attendants have left for the Noble's Quarter. The gate is now shut."

We headed to the orphanage through the back entrance and saw that everyone had changed from their robes to their secondhand clothes. The taues set in the basement had been taken outside. At Lutz's suggestion we split into two teams, with Fran balancing them by age and gender and so on. We selected a location broad enough to run around in and everyone promised not to leave it.

"Clean up after yourselves. Don't get loud enough for those outside of the temple to notice and get curious. And finally, have fun without hurting yourself or others. Understood?"

"Understood!"

"Alright, we're gonna hand out the taues." Lutz glanced at the group of baskets. As the person of the highest status there, I had to move first. The taues I had seen in the forest before were about the size of a single knuckle, but the ones in the basket were as large as my fist. They were indeed swollen with water and felt just like water balloons. I hadn't gotten a good look at them before due to closing my eyes, so this was my first time really looking at taues.

"Wow, they really are big!"

The second I grabbed a large taue on top of the pile, I felt mana being drained from me just like I had during the offering with the divine instrument. The taue began twisting and bulging in my hand, changing shape.

"Gyaaah?!"

"What's wrong, Myne?!"

"It's sucking out my mana!" I could see what looked like hard seeds popping into existence and growing within the halfway transparent taue. "This is so gross! What's happening?!"

"Like I would know!"

As I floundered with the taue still in hand, its previously light-red color darkened due to the seeds beginning to overwhelm the water. The squishy skin hardened and became opaque. It was at that point that I finally realized what I was looking at. This red fruit was no doubt the trombe seed I had encountered in the past.

"Lutz, this is a trombe! Go get knives!" I yelled, still holding the taue, and Lutz stopped peering at it to immediately go rushing to the basement which we now used as a storage area. He returned with baskets filled with knives and billhooks, then started giving instructions to the orphans.

"Anyone used to gathering in the forest by now, ready your knife. Valuable paper-making material is about to show up. Gather every bit of it that you can!"

The orphans all yelled "Right!" in unison, and by the time

everyone had their knives, the taue was rock hard and getting increasingly hot. At this point, I could expect a trombe to pop out if I threw it to the ground like I did before.

“Sister Myne, we’re ready!” Gil stood by my side, wielding his billhook like a crime-fighting hero from a kid’s TV show. Lutz, with a knife in one hand, pointed at some nearby unpaved grass.

“Myne, throw it where there’s dirt!”

With Lutz and Gil’s voices in my ears, I took aim at the grass and threw the taue as hard as I could.

“I choose you, growy tree thing!”

After the Festival

“Come on! You didn’t reach it!”

Just as Lutz’s devastated yell implied, the taue fruit I had thrown didn’t reach the grass and instead hit the edge of the stone flooring, where it started crackling while exploding open. Tiny seeds shot out from the fruit the moment it broke and started sprouting. Or at least, the seeds that hit the grass with dirt did. Those that hit the stone dried up rapidly, whereas those rooting in the grass had already grown to ankle length.

“Gah! Wh-What are those?!”

“They’re all a trombe, and it’s growing fast. Start chopping once it gets to knee length!” Lutz gave instructions to the scared orphans and watched the trombe carefully as it grew beneath him. “Fran, grab Myne and wait in the back!”

At Lutz’s instructions, Fran picked me up and retreated from the front lines. Without a knife, the best I could do was show my support from the back.

“Go get’m!” Lutz brandished his blade and ran to harvest the wood furthest from the paved stone. Gil, running after him, was the first to chop off some wood. He swung down hard and a thin branch fell to the ground with a snap. The orphans, seeing that even a wild swing could easily chop off a branch, and that the chopped-off branch didn’t keep growing, all charged the trombe at once.

“Sister Myne, what exactly is going on?”

Just how much of this would Fran be telling the High Priest? Had I doomed myself to a lecture later? I desperately ran my brain at maximum power, trying to think if he would buy it if I said this was normal outside of the temple and not a big deal at all.

“That wood is used to make the highest quality plant paper that I know of. With it, we’ll be able to make paper much, much better than anything else you’ve seen.” I hadn’t lied. But I also hadn’t given Fran the answer he wanted. He opened his mouth to say something, but Gil yelled out before he could.

“Knives won’t work once they get too big. Step back! I’ll take care of’m!” I turned around to see Gil urging a girl with a knife back while chopping down branch after branch, each now long enough to reach their thighs. It was clear just how much he had grown while visiting the forest.

“Alright! We did it!” Gil, striking a victory pose, looked at me and grinned. I understood that to mean “please praise me” and thus gave him a nod of approval.

“...Is that all of it?” asked Lutz. The kids, picking up branches and scouring the area, nodded firmly in reply.

“What do you think we should do, Lutz? Should we save some of the taues and grow them later?” It would be a waste to miss this opportunity to safely harvest the valuable trombe wood, but Lutz shook his head.

“Let’s grow one or two more, then toss them around like we were planning to. Taues eventually dry up after they’re taken away from soil, and there’s more taues in the forest. We can just get more later.”

“Sorry, everyone, but would you mind harvesting a bit more? This wood can be used to make very high quality paper, and I can send more money to the orphanage by selling it.”

“Sister Myne, what will sending more money do?” The orphans, lacking so much knowledge that they legitimately did not understand what money was, looked at me with confused expressions. Everything they needed in life had come in the form of divine gifts. I had explained to them that everything in the world costs money, and that they were not yet earning the money being spent to make their soup, but they didn’t understand me.

“More money means you can make more food for yourselves. We will also be able to buy more winter firewood for the orphanage.”

“Alright, let’s do it!”

Not much firewood was given to the orphanage. The only rooms that had fireplaces were the dining hall in the girls’ building and a large communal room in the boys’ building. To make matters worse, the stone buildings cooled nigh instantly once they ran out of firewood, and at that point they had no choice but to huddle together for warmth. Winter supplies were a critical issue with the temple as strapped for cash as it was.

Thus, the promise of more firewood reasonably filled the kids with enthusiasm, and after that they harvested three entire trombes. We stopped once we had an entire large basket filled with them, since the sooner we got to work on the black bark the better.

“Alright, who wants to start tossing taues?” suggested Lutz, making the kids stop their eager chopping and blink in confusion.

“We’re not gonna turn them all into paper?”

“Doesn’t matter what we do with these, we can always go get more. We did it today and we can do it again.”

The kids cheered with excitement. Apparently, picking up taues in the forest had been a lot of fun for them.

“Um,” I chimed in, “by the way. It looks like all the grass is

completely gone now, but I guess there's nothing we can do about that." Due to growing trombe after trombe, the grass had died and the earth was all upended. I flattened out the dirt as best I could and stomped on a protruding stone to get it back in line with the rest.

"Don't sweat it, this is the summer. Grass will grow back in no time."

"...I'll just try to look on the bright side. At least nobody has to weed around here for now." The three of us concluded that there wouldn't be any blue priests bothering to visit the backside of the orphanage, so no harm done.

"I'll take care of the taue throwing, so you go get changed, Myne. You look sick. Probably gonna catch a fever at this rate."

"Mhm, my body does kinda feel heavy. I'm shivering a little."

"Delia should have your bath ready and waiting. Shall we go?" said Fran while lifting me up. I saw over Fran's shoulder the kids starting to throw the taues. The way they split into their two groups and ran around while shrieking excitedly was no different from how the kids in the lower city had spent their festival. I was struck with the desire to get more games and fun things into the orphanage.

"Geez, what were you doing?! A blue shrine maiden should not be playing with orphans so much she gets sick!"

When Fran reached my chambers with me slumped over in exhaustion, we found Delia waiting for us, her mouth bent into an angled frown. He brought me to the washtub, and after Delia chased him off, she took off my soaked clothing and forced me into the warm bath that had been waiting for me. She added fresh hot water to the somewhat lukewarm bath water, bringing it up to an ideal temperature.

"You do love your piping hot water, don't you?" murmured Delia. She then glared sharply at me. "Well, your body wants hot water because you let yourself freeze in wet clothing! You shouldn't play with water when you're weak and sickly. This is just common sense!"

"...Delia, could you be a little more quiet? This is a nice bath and I want to enjoy it." I sighed as the hot water warmed my body.

"Of course it is, I prepared it."

"Yes, and thanks to you, I feel fantastic right now. Thank you." I still wasn't strong enough to draw water from a well, which meant I couldn't ready baths for myself.

"I just did as I was instructed. I'm not Gil, you don't need to thank me for doing my work." Despite Delia's mumbling, I knew she was just embarrassed. I let out a little giggle and sunk shoulders-deep into the water before starting to think about trombes.

I hadn't felt the fruit draining my mana at the time, maybe

because the fruit was already on the verge of growing or maybe because I didn't know anything about mana or the Devouring back then. But this time, I clearly felt my mana flowing into the fruit. I would estimate offhand that it took about two or three small magic stones worth of mana to sprout one water-filled taue.

It would depend on the amount of mana an individual had, but it seemed possible that taue fruit could help decrease the number of kids dying from the Devouring. An important first task would be to make knowledge of the Devouring commonplace, and there would need to be people around to harvest the trombe born from the process. *And if I'm being greedy, it sure would be nice if people gave the trombe wood to the Myne Workshop.*

But if what Lutz said was right, it would be difficult to store taues. In the spring they would run out of water and dry up half a day after being separated from the earth, and even water-filled taues in the summer would dry up after a day or two, just like how seeds dropped on paved stone walkways would dry up rapidly without sprouting. They could probably be preserved by storing them somewhere with contact to the ground, but wind or rain might wash them away, and it'd be terrifying for a trombe to sprout out of nowhere in the middle of the city.

"...I guess I should report this to Benno before doing anything?" It would be good to report that we had found a way to actively harvest trombes during the summer, and while I was there I could ask him to spread information about the Devouring and how to use taue fruits to cure it.

That was that. With my thoughts settled, I stood up and got out of the bath. At which point my head began to spin. I wasn't sure if it was a fever or if I had just stayed in the hot water for too long. I grabbed my head and squatted on the floor.

Delia clasped a hand on her mouth to hold back a scream and hurriedly began wiping me dry. She put on my blouse and skirt while I was still kind of wet, then ran off to get Fran.

"Sister Myne!"

"...Aaah, I really should have put a mattress on my bed by now. The board's fine. Go ahead and set me on it," I instructed, since Fran had picked me up and was anxiously looking all over the room for somewhere to lay me down. He rested me on the board as gently as he could.

"Delia, go call for Lutz. Fran, could you get changed into outside clothes? I think the sooner I get home, the better..."

"As you wish."

Lutz was naturally soaked head to toe from the taue throwing, which left only Fran to carry me. When Lutz explained to Mom that I

had needed to get changed at the temple after being pelted by fruit at the festival, she naturally sighed. Fran apologized with a grave expression, calling himself a failure of an attendant, but Mom waved him off, saying that she knew that this would happen if I went to the festival, and to tell the High Priest that I would be bedridden for a few days. She then tucked me into bed.

“It may have ended with you sopping wet and sick, but did you enjoy the festival?”

“...There were a lot of surprises, but the kids at the orphanage were all happy. That made it all worth it.”

Lutz and Mom were both right, and ultimately I spent three days bedridden with a fever. I had asked Lutz to tell Benno about the taues, and his reply was that he wanted to talk details when I was better again, which meant going to his store before I went back to the temple.

“Good morning, Mr. Benno.”

“Looks like you’ve stirred up some trouble again.” Benno immediately gave me a glare with his red eyes, the embodiments of frustration, causing me to flinch.

“...T-Trouble? But now we don’t have to rely on trombes showing up randomly, we can harvest them at will. And it’ll be perfectly safe if there’s a team of people at the ready, so really, I think you should be complimenting me right now.”

“You’re not entirely wrong. It’s good that we can harvest trombes now that you’ve discovered that taues are trombe seeds. But that’ll be more trouble than it’s worth, yeah?”

“Really?” I hadn’t thought out what might be problematic about harvesting trombes.

Benno murmured “Thoughtless as expected,” then looked beside me at Lutz. “Sorry, Lutz, but go tell the temple Myne’s gonna be late today. Then stick with Mark until I call for you. This lecture’s gonna take a while.”

“Understood, Master Benno.” Lutz gave me a weary smile and wished me luck before leaving the room, having offered me none of the emotional support I needed. I now had no allies by my side and could only watch as Benno drummed his fingertips against the table.

“Lutz told me the gist of it. Taue fruit suck up your mana, grow rapidly, then turn into trombes. All on point so far?”

“Uh huh.”

“You think they’ll be able to replace magic tools?” It was a little problematic that taues weren’t harvestable during the winter, but in my case, twenty of them would be enough for me to survive the winter without being overwhelmed before spring came. Though given

that one's total amount of mana grew as the body developed, I didn't know how much I would need as an adult.

"...I think so. Which is why I—"

"Don't speak a word of this to anyone. Not a single person," said Benno with a stern expression. My eyes widened and for a second I couldn't believe what I had heard, since my plan was to spread the information as soon as possible.

"Mana is under the jurisdiction of nobles. If it gets out that cheap fruit you can find in any forest can be used in place of expensive magic tools, it's possible that noble society and the temple will get flipped upside down. Handle this the wrong way and you'll get killed."

"...But if people don't learn about this, commoners with the Devouring will keep dying." I had found a money-free way to save those with the Devouring, but it wouldn't help anyone if nobody knew about it.

"Yep, that's right. But how are you gonna figure out which kids have the Devouring? I sure can't tell. Can you, with all your experience?"

I shook my head. The only kid with the Devouring I had met was Freida, but I couldn't tell just from looking at her that she had mana or the Devouring. It would understandably be impossible for us to save those with the Devouring if we couldn't find them.

"We might be able to find them by having every kid that gets born hold one of those fruits. But I can guess that the second a kid's found out to have mana, nobles will come steal them away. Who would have their kid tested if they know they'll be taken away? I know your family wouldn't."

There was nothing I could say. In the past I had looked for a way to extend my life without relying on magic tools. Why? To avoid nobles taking me away. If we identified kids with the Devouring on a large scale, nobles would know where to find them. That would defeat the purpose. But at the same time, the information would need to be spread on a large scale for it to save anyone.

"If not targeting all kids at birth, then what? Will you have people bring any kid that gets a bad fever? If it's the Devouring then taues can save them, but if it's not, you'll just turn them away? Too bad, tough, bad luck? Finding kids that way is just gonna spread disease and make parents of kids without the Devouring furious."

I could already imagine a parent saying "*You cured that kid so easily, why not mine?*" I clenched my fist, frustrated by all the problems I hadn't considered until Benno brought them up.

"What about the chance that kids with the Devouring growing up without nobles could cause problems of their own? Will they be able

to control their mana properly without training? What will happen to the temple once it can no longer get mana from the children of noble families that couldn't afford magic tools for everyone? Noble society has a monopoly on mana right now. What're the chances that this information would send enormous ripples through it?"

"...I don't know." I couldn't answer a single one of the questions that Benno listed out. I didn't understand this world's social structure or politics well enough, nor mana's place in the world.

"I get that you're trying to save the lives of kids with the Devouring, but the ripples will just be too big. For now you should just keep your mouth shut about it and keep it as a lifeline if you're ever driven out of the temple or blackmailed with magic tools on the line. The scale and impact of this is just too big. Or at the very least, it's too big for me to handle."

If Benno couldn't handle it, there was no way I could. If you asked me if I wanted to stir up more trouble right after the purging in the Sovereignty ended and noble society climbed back to its feet, my answer would be no. I didn't want that much trouble on my back.

"I'm thinking you can harvest some trombe wood in the forest while passing it off as coincidence, but that's it. All this about identifying those with the Devouring should be kept secret under lock and key."

I didn't feel comfortable leaving people to die despite knowing a way to save them. My discomfort must have shown on my face, as Benno gave a sympathetic shrug.

"Don't look like that. If you ever find someone with the Devouring, you can save them in secret. I'm just saying you shouldn't let nobles hear about this. You want to declare war against noble society or something? Don't forget, it's nobles that're gonna be buying those books you make."

That first bit made me smile a little, and my mood brightened. If I found someone suffering with the Devouring, I could save them. I didn't have to worry about those I couldn't see. I could just keep on living like I had been.

"At the very least, I can't start a war before I've risen literacy rates enough that commoners can read books too. Not that I would want to deal with that in the first place."

After I replied to Benno's joke with some humor of my own, he let out a laugh. "Yeah, can't say I'd want to deal with teaching commoners to read either."

"I was talking about the war there. I want to spread books throughout the world, so of course I have a plan to raise literacy rates."

The temple was a valuable place to be. At some point I intended

to use the orphanage to hold a Sunday School class, except not on Sunday. To start, I would raise the gray priests into teachers through the process of instructing the orphans. Then, I would develop technology for printing as best I could, which I would first use to make educational material based on the bible. The High Priest shouldn't have any complaints if I used printing to spread the bible.

"So? Perfect, isn't it?" I puffed out my chest with pride, but for some reason Benno was cradling his head.

"Every plan you've ever made has been full of holes, and I don't think this will be an exception. But y'know, Myne. Is it physically impossible for you to use your head on anything but books?"

"Yes. Probably." I added on that I had never really tried to put much effort into things outside of books, so I wasn't sure.

"What a waste," said Benno with a heavy sigh.

"Rude!"

"It's the truth," he continued, before his grin hardened into a stern expression. When Benno's expression hardened and he lowered his voice a bit, he always had something serious to say. "We're on the same page about keeping quiet about the taues so we can monopolize the trombes, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Alright. With that out of the way, I want to hear your thoughts on the final problem on that list I gave you."

...*Oh, so that's why he sent Lutz out.* I swallowed hard and looked at Benno, finally understanding that Benno saying he was going to lecture me had been a bluff to get Lutz out of the room.

Lutz's Path Through Life

"Lutz is still a minor. I need his parent's permission to take him out of the city to work for days at a time. If we leave without their permission, it'll be treated as a kidnapping."

Benno sighed as he explained the circumstances. I was glad to hear the details, since his list of problems had only mentioned the "struggling to get permission" part.

"I sent Mark to get their permission, but they wouldn't budge. Not sure if there's just some gap between craftsmen and merchants I'm not getting or if his dad's just real stubborn. Any ideas?"

"I mean..." At the end of the day, Benno's problem was getting permission from Lutz's parents. That was something he needed to talk about with them and Lutz. I might have been Lutz's childhood friend, but I was a complete third party. Those involved were: Benno, who wanted to take Lutz outside of the city on work, Lutz, who really wanted to leave the city, and Lutz's parents, whose lack of permission was causing friction. It wasn't really my place to say anything. But when I explained that to Benno, he scratched his head and glared at me.

"That's why I'm asking what you think. Every scrap of information matters here. If Lutz knows more about you than anyone, surely you know more about Lutz than anyone, yeah?"

Benno always prepared ahead thoroughly, so naturally he wanted to gather information on Lutz's parents before moving forward. I didn't know too much about his work life, but it was true that after spending so much time with Lutz, I knew more about him than pretty much anyone else.

"Why won't they give you their permission? Isn't it for his job?"

"That's what I want to know. According to Mark, they just said no and left it at that. Lutz mentioned that his home situation wasn't great when he asked for the attic room, but just how bad is it?"

Lutz had stopped talking much about his home life after he announced that he was becoming an apprentice merchant and strained his relationship with his family. I could imagine that he definitely didn't want to feel like he was showing weakness to his bosses, Mark and Benno.

"Lutz's family is against him becoming a merchant at all."

"Say what? They weren't just against him becoming a traveling

merchant, they were against him becoming a city merchant too?" Benno opened his wide with surprise, and I nodded slowly.

"Lutz's dad works in construction, and all his older brothers are apprentices in construction and carpentry-related jobs. His dad wanted him to do the same. According to him, getting stable work as a craftsman is better than riding the highs and lows of being a merchant."

"Pretty sure not all craftsmen get stable work."

There were workshops out there that went bankrupt after failing to get any jobs, so not even craftsmen were absolutely guaranteed stable work. But a skilled worker would have no problem getting hired in a workshop of the same trade, and they didn't have to shoulder debt to keep running a store or anything like that.

"Lutz once told me that his dad told him he would never accept him being a merchant, ever." He had harsh words for merchants, saying that they lived off the work of others without ever making anything themselves, that one had to be a heartless monster to make it as one, and so on. He was so hostile to merchants that it made me wonder what kind of scam artist had screwed him over in the past.

"...I'm impressed Lutz pulled through all that."

Considering how most kids in the city got their jobs through the help of their parents and family, Lutz was quite the exception. But he was so lively and passionate about his work that I would never say he had made the wrong choice.

"Lutz was planning to become a live-in apprentice if his parents kicked him out over his decision. Though that ended up not happening since his mom accepted how serious he was."

"A live-in apprentice? His family situation's so bad he would actually consider becoming one of those?" Benno blinked in surprise. Normally, there weren't any kids crazy enough to willingly throw themselves into the hell that was being a live-in apprentice. Most of them would realize that their home situation, no matter how bad it might be, was better than the alternative.

"I'm not entirely sure how things are for him right now, since he doesn't talk about his home life that much. But I am worried that his brothers might not like him very much right now."

"What do you mean?"

"From his family's perspective, Lutz might look like he's spitting on his dad's help to play around instead of working. They might not be able to see how much Lutz is growing and how hard he's working since they're not in the same line of work. I'm not sure, since I've never talked to Lutz's brothers about him."

But I still knew them better than I knew his dad, whom I had barely even seen before. I knew he looked the most like his eldest son

Zasha and that he took pride in his construction work, but that was it. I often saw mothers chatting by the well, but I never really saw the fathers.

"I think Lutz will run away from home if he learns that his parents are directly stopping his dreams from coming true. He's stubborn and won't back down now that he's made his decision. But being a live-in apprentice is a last resort. It would be too hard for him to live alone as a minor, and I think that even with all this fighting, families should stick together and help each other."

Hearing that, Benno briefly looked up at the nearby stairs and gave a wry smile. Benno had worked tirelessly to support his family ever since his parents' untimely deaths. They were precious to him, and he was such a deeply sentimental person that he would choose to live life as a bachelor after his one true love died. I doubted he would want to damage Lutz's relationship with his family.

"I think the only tidy solution to this will be to explain the situation to Lutz and have him agree to wait until he's an adult. By that point he won't need his parents' permission and there shouldn't be problems with him leaving the city. Waiting is the safest choice here."

Things would be different if he couldn't leave the city for his entire life without parental permission, but as it stood, it seemed like it would be best for him to just be patient. There wasn't any need to force things and shatter his relationship with his family. But Benno shook his head with a grim expression at my idea.

"That'll be too slow. He won't make it in time."

Are we in a hurry for some reason? I tilted my head in confusion, and after tight frown, Benno let out a heavy sigh.

"It's got something to do with work. I can't talk about it right now." As I wasn't an employee of Benno's store, it wasn't my place to dig deeper. I just nodded and moved on.

"In that case, it would probably be safe to assume that this is going to split apart Lutz's family no matter what. Lutz will definitely pick his life as a merchant over his family. You wanting to take him to other cities must mean you have high hopes for him, but just how far are you willing to go to take care of an apprentice?"

Since Lutz was a lehang, Benno wasn't responsible for keeping him fed or anything like that. If he started taking care of Lutz beyond what the contract stated, he would be isolating him even further from the other lehangs. And if Benno wasn't even prepared to do that in the first place, becoming a live-in apprentice would make Lutz miserable. It would be better to just maintain the status quo over that. I gave Benno a firm look, prepared to call him out on any half-hearted non-answers, and he raised his hands in defeat.

“Y’know, personally, I was thinking about adopting him.”

His answer floored me. I never saw it coming. If Benno was willing to go that far for Lutz, I wouldn’t need to worry even if he did run away from home. With Benno’s silver spoon backing him up, Lutz wouldn’t have to worry about his home life or work life after separating from his family to go outside the city as a merchant.

“I didn’t think that you cared so much about Lutz, Mr. Benno. If that’s how dedicated you are, you should just talk to Lutz about this and then have a meeting with his parents! It’ll be fine!”

“Talk to Lutz, huh?” Benno groaned a bit, his hesitation clear on his face.

“No matter what happens, involving Lutz is important. Up until now he’s making decisions all on his own and we shouldn’t exclude him now.”

Benno adopting Lutz meant that one day he would inherit Benno’s store. Or to be more specific, since Corinna’s child would be inheriting the Gilberta Company, Lutz would probably inherit the Italian restaurant, the plant paper, and basically everything to do with the Myne Workshop. Which was likely why he wanted Lutz with him when making a new plant paper workshop in another city. Lutz’s hard work had earned Benno’s approval, and realizing that made me feel as happy as I would if I were in his shoes.

“You’d like for Lutz to be my adopted kid?”

“It’s not the adoption I’m happy about, it’s that you appreciate his hard work.”

Benno let out a laugh and rang his bell to summon Mark. It seemed our secret chat was over.

“Yes, Master Benno?”

“Call Lutz over.”

Mark left the room with graceful, fluid movements and returned with Lutz. They were both walking in the same way. It was kind of funny to see how Lutz was mimicking Mark.

“Lutz, I need to talk to your parents about something. Could you set something up for me? Sooner rather than later.” Benno’s request was so out of the blue that Lutz froze in place and blinked for a second before replying.

“...My parents? Er, certainly, Master Benno.” Lutz gave his half-hearted acknowledgment, to which Benno nodded before continuing on to give him his work for the day. He wanted Lutz to stay at the temple after taking me there and help the Myne Workshop with the trombe paper currently being mass produced.

Lutz gave a soft smile just like Mark’s and nodded. “Understood. Let’s go, Myne.”

Lutz and I began our walk to the temple together. Everything was

going so well for Lutz that I couldn't help but start humming.

"You're sure in a good mood, Myne."

"I'm happy, so what?"

"I dunno, I'm just glad Benno's lecture didn't get you down."

"Ngh... Don't even remind me."

According to what Lutz told me on our walk, Benno had been sending him to the temple while I was sick so that he could begin the mass production of trombe paper. Lutz had been sending the orphans to the forest, getting the black bark, and even taking potatoffels there to make buttered potatoffels just like we used to.

"Y'know, I think I'm acting a lot more like the workshop's foreman than you are," said Lutz.

I shrugged. We blue shrine maidens weren't allowed to do manual labor, and there was nothing I could do about that. Everyone was having so much fun that I wanted to join in, but I was literally not allowed to.

"I'm only the forewoman so I can get income while working as an apprentice shrine maiden. You're working hard enough that I'll hire you as assistant foreman with a nice paycheck to boot, Lutz, so keep it up."

"Assistant foreman sounds cool and all, but I'm just helping you out, yeah? This is what I've always done."

"And you'll probably keep doing it forever, since you'll help sell the new products I think up."

Benno was probably making Lutz teach the orphans at the Myne Workshop to make paper as part of his training, a necessary step for spreading paper across the country.

"...Oh? There's nobody here?"

We arrived at the temple, but none of my attendants were at the gate. It was the first time since becoming a shrine maiden that nobody was waiting at the gate for me. I started to look around for them, but Lutz just took my hand and walked inside the temple.

"I contacted Fran and told him I didn't know when you'd get here since Master Benno was lecturing you. Might as well just go straight to your chambers, yeah?"

"You're right, it wouldn't be nice to make them wait outside for so long. Thanks, Lutz."

"I'm gonna head over to the workshop. I'll see you on my way out."

Lutz and I split up at the staircase to the chapel. After climbing it myself, I went around the orphanage and headed to my chambers. The door was shut, and since my attendants usually opened it, that gave me pause. I didn't carry around a bell to summon my attendants, and I

would probably get scolded for being improper if I just yelled for them, so what was I supposed to do?

For a brief while I just stood in front of the door, pondering what a noble would do in my situation. But no amount of pondering would change the fact that I didn't know enough about the nobility to say anything for sure. It felt so silly to be worrying so much about entering my own chambers that I decided to just open the door with a knock.

...It's not like anybody will be there to get mad at me. I can just ask Fran what I should have done later. I knocked on the door and called out "I'm coming in" before opening it. Inside, I saw Fran hurriedly descending the stairs.

"Good morning, Fran. Sorry to worry you. My fever has gone down and I am feeling quite better."

Fran glanced at the stairs with an exceedingly troubled look, then lowered his voice. "Sister Myne, I must tell you th—"

"Do you not know how improper it is for a young lady to walk on her own without an attendant?"

"Bwuh?! The High Priest?!" I hadn't predicted at all that the High Priest would be in my room. My mouth hung open in shock as I looked up the stairs and saw him staring back down at me.

"Close your mouth. It is unseemly. But more importantly, putting aside the lower city, walking on your own in the temple is exceedingly improper. Take care not to do it again."

At Fran's encouragement I walked up to the second floor, where I meekly listened as the High Priest scolded me while elegantly drinking tea. According to him, the noble course of action would have been to send word ahead and have an attendant wait at the gate no matter what. Alternatively, I could have informed the gate guard of my arrival and waited in a nearby waiting room for an attendant to come get me.

...That's a bit too advanced for me. And really, I can't believe he's this serious about something as simple as opening a door. When is this lecture going to end? I started to get bored of listening to the lecture, at which point I realized I didn't know why the High Priest was in my room and used that to change the subject.

"High Priest, I have learned how to open a door."

"This was not about opening a door. Were you even listening? I am telling you how to act like a proper lady."

Ohhh. He wasn't scolding me about the door in particular. I didn't realize. It looked like the lecture was about to heat up big time, so I interrupted it with a question. "Might I ask the reason for your visit today? It must be something important for you to come all the way to my chambers. Are you not in a hurry?"

Normally I would already be heading to his room to do paperwork. He had mentioned having more spare time thanks to my assistance, but I wouldn't want that time spent on lecturing me. My question reminded the High Priest of why he was here, and after a cough, he looked at me.

"Has your fever gone entirely down?"

"Oh? Yes, I'm fully recovered. Sorry to have worried you."

"That is good to hear," he said while forming an ice-cold smile. I straightened my back with a jerk, realizing I was about to get the kind of lecture he gave in his secret room.

"I believe I told you to not cause a stir. Did I not?"

"Bwuh? Wha?" I had been bedridden with a fever for so many days that, coming right off a talk with Benno, I had no idea what the High Priest was talking about. What stir was he talking about?

"I went to check if you had cleaned up after yourself and found all the dirt in a wide area completely upended, with some of the stone pavement slightly out of place."

I had thought that no blue priests would bother going there, but apparently the High Priest had gone out of his way to check up after us. It seemed he was the kind of hard worker who felt compelled to confirm things himself despite being so busy. His light golden eyes narrowed, affording me no escape.

"What in the world did you do to cause all that?"

"Well... Um... Just as I informed you ahead of time, we..." I looked at Fran. What exactly had he told the High Priest? I had no idea what to say to settle this situation.

"Both Fran and the orphans stated that they harvested wood to turn into paper. That they threw taues amongst themselves. And finally, that you fell sick with a fever. Nothing more."

"...And that's all that happened." I nodded repeatedly after he finished. That probably meant that nobody had leaked how the wood they'd harvested was from trombes sprouted from taues that had drained my mana. Since I didn't know exactly what the High Priest knew, I kept my mouth shut so as to not say anything unnecessary. I could ask Fran what he had said later.

"For everyone to answer the same, they must be telling the truth. But you cannot deny causing a stir after doing enough of something to push the stone pavement itself out of place," said the High Priest. I steeled myself for a barrage of questions, only for him to glare at me. "Myne, I sentence you to one day in the repentance chamber."

Wait... He's not questioning me? Benno would definitely question me until he got the answers he wanted. Are you sure about this? Perhaps due to having asked the orphans about the situation while I was bedridden, the High Priest pursued the subject no further and simply

punished me instead.

“The repentance chamber?”

“Yes. You will pray to the gods while reflecting on what you have done.”

I was honestly a little disappointed, but in contrast to my general apathy toward chilling in detention for a day, Fran’s face paled and Delia shouted “Unbelievable!” out loud.

“I have never heard of a blue shrine maiden being sent to the repentance chamber! It would be disgraceful!”

“High Priest, I beg you to reconsider!”

It seemed that I was the first apprentice blue shrine maiden in history to be sent to the repentance chamber. But to be honest, as mentioned, I would pick chilling in detention over the High Priest digging into what happened at the Star Festival with his frosty rage freezing me over.

“Attendants, I have earned this punishment by breaking my promise with the High Priest. It is only natural that I take responsibility for my actions. I am happy as long as the orphans are not punished.”

I would gladly take any punishment that didn’t lead to the orphans getting penalized in association. They had so much fun that day and I didn’t want their happy memories of the festival tarnished by lectures and time in the repentance chamber.

“High Priest, where is the repentance room, and what should I do within it? Er, I mean, I understand that I need to repent, but is there anything in particular I need to do?”

Visions of punishments I had suffered back in my Urano days ran through my head: Being forced to clean, having to write “I won’t do it again” a hundred times, and so on. But the High Priest just raised an eyebrow in disbelief. I had apparently just asked a question with an answer exceedingly obvious to anyone in the temple.

“What else but offering prayers to the gods?”

Wait... He wants me to do that silly praying pose for the whole day? The sheer intensity of the punishment left me at a loss for words, at which point Gil tried comforting me by saying he was used to it and would go in with me. But that was naturally against the rules, so I went to the chambers on my own.

“Reflect on what you have done.” The High Priest brought me to the repentance room right next to the chapel and directed me inside. It was a small room made of the same white stone as the chapel, and I could see thin slits at the top for letting in air. It also let in light, which made the white room brighter than most. The room was chilly despite it being summer since even the floor was made of stone. It would probably be miserable in the winter, but it wasn’t so bad in the

summer.

“Sister Myne, will you be okay?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine.”

Fran and Gil’s worried faces vanished from view after the wooden door closed. Without anyone watching there was nobody to check if I was actually praying, so I immediately sat in a corner. The chilly floor was very calming. In order to kill time, I decided to take out Benno’s list of problems (which I had stealthily hidden in my skirt pocket) and think about them. I could do all that repenting stuff when the High Priest came to check on me.

“Mmm, I think an introduction-only system would work well for this problem. But what about this problem? I feel like it’d be kinda awkward to ask the High Priest if I can eat lunch and dinner with him just to learn more about noble food. Yeah... fwaaaaah.”

A big yawn swelled up out of me as I stared at the list of problems. Maybe I still wasn’t feeling too well. I was getting really sleepy out of nowhere. Judging by how hungry I was, it was probably past noon.

I folded up the list of problems, stuck it in my pocket, and lay down on the floor. I closed my eyes and let the pleasant fog take me over so I could recover a bit through an afternoon nap.

“Myne, why are you sleeping when you should be... Fran!”

“Ah! Sister Myne?!”

My body had chilled to the bone while I napped on the cold stone floor. By the time the High Priest came to get me, I was feverishly stuck to the floor, unable to move at all. I could hear Fran cradling his head and saying that he would apologize to my mom for letting me get sick again the day after I went back to the temple.

“Had she not recovered?!”

“If I may, High Priest. I believe you underestimated the extent of Sister Myne’s poor health. I did request that you reconsider sending her to the repentance chamber.”

“I see. You spoke not for her honor, but for her health...”

By ignoring Fran’s warning, he had gotten me sick right after I recovered from my last fever. The High Priest considered that his full responsibility, and in the end, he ended up being the one repenting.

Lutz Running Away from Home

Three days had passed since I ended up bedridden when Tuuli came rushing into the bedroom.

“Oh no, Myne! Lutz ran away from home and he’s not coming back!”

I shot up so fast I fell over forward. “What do you mean, Tuuli? What happened? Is he okay?” I rapidly asked a barrage of questions with my face planted firmly against my bed.

Tuuli winced a little, probably regretting her decision to tell me. She stroked my hair with a worried frown. “Sorry, Myne. I should have waited to tell you until your fever went down. Don’t push yourself, your fever will flare back up.”

“Tell me, Tuuli.” I clasped Tuuli’s hand and repeatedly begged her to tell me, until eventually she let out a defeated sigh.

“...Lay back down, Myne. I’ll go get Ralph. Okay?”

I nodded and Tuuli left the room with a turn. Then I heard her footsteps fade away as she went outside and locked the front door behind her. I strained my ears, waiting for her to come back with my face still planted against the bed.

After a lengthy period of anxiously waiting for Tuuli’s return, I heard returning footsteps, and then the front door being unlocked and opened.

“...Ralph, what happened to Lutz?”

When Ralph came inside with Tuuli and saw me bedridden with a fever, he sighed. “I thought for sure he was camping out here...”

“Didn’t I just tell you? Myne’s been in bed for three days already. No way could she know that Lutz ran away from home yesterday,” said Tuuli with an angry pout.

Ralph apologized for doubting her and turned back to me.

“Yesterday, Lutz started yelling at Dad the second he got home. He was all like, ‘Why are you getting in my way?!’ and ‘I’ve put up with you for this long, but not anymore! I’m out of here!’ Then he dashed out, looking crazy mad.”

Ralph’s explanation was all it took for me to realize what happened. Benno had definitely told him why he couldn’t bring him to the other city. That was a relief. I could guess, then, that Benno was looking after Lutz. He wouldn’t be able to adopt him immediately, but he probably would treat him more or less like a son nonetheless.

“Mom’s losing it, but Dad said not to bother since he’ll probably come back soon. I thought he’d be back when he got hungry, but he didn’t come back for breakfast or lunch. I’m getting worried. Do you know where he is, Myne?” asked Ralph, which made me feel uneasy. If Benno was looking over him, then he should be at work. How could they not know where he was?

“You don’t know where he is...? Did he not go to work?”

“Well, uh... We dunno where he works, so...” Ralph avoided looking at me as he spoke.

For a second, I couldn’t comprehend what I had heard. About two and a half months had passed since our baptism, but Lutz had been going to the Gilberta Company since long before becoming an apprentice — almost a full year by now.

“How do you not know? It’s the Gilberta Company, remember?”

“...We know the name ’cause he went to Sieg’s workshop a while ago. But not even Sieg knows where that store is.”

“Are you saying you wouldn’t even know that if Lutz and I hadn’t gone to Sieg’s workshop?” I asked hesitantly, but Ralph just awkwardly looked away without answering. That ticked Tuuli off.

“I can’t believe you! Ralph, you don’t even know where your little brother works?! Don’t you talk about work at home?”

Brothers probably didn’t talk as much as sisters did, but still, not talking to Lutz about work at all was just kinda mean. I wasn’t sure if they just didn’t care or if they were stubbornly avoiding the subject in protest, but still, knowing so little they couldn’t even find him after he ran away from home was really a problem.

I reached out and tightly squeezed Ralph’s shirt. “...Ralph. It might not be my place to say this, but please talk to Lutz more.”

“Lutz is the one who won’t talk. And really, I’m the victim here. Lutz got the job he wanted even though everyone else was against it, and now he just does whatever he wants on his days off without even going to the forest. What’s his problem? He’s got it easy!” Ralph swatted my hand off with his eyes wide with anger.

“Hey! Ralph! Don’t be rough with Myne! She’s still sick!”

“S-Sorry...”



Shouting doesn't really help me either, I thought while preparing to back up Lutz. I was aware of how much time I was taking from him, after all.

"But Lutz is working on his days off too. Don't you know that when Benno calls for him or I march him around, he gets paid? He's not playing around or anything."

Ralph's eyes widened, then he slowly shook his head. "...I didn't know about that."

There were some misunderstandings since they barely talked, but ultimately, Ralph was worried about Lutz. There was no mistaking that. And it really wasn't my place to get involved here. Ralph needed to talk to Lutz, not me.

I looked up at Tuuli. Through visiting Corinna and going clothes shopping with me, she had met Benno and several other employees of the Gilberta Company before. It would probably be better if Ralph went there with her rather than barging in by himself.

"Tuuli, would you take Ralph to the Gilberta Company for me? You don't have to drag Lutz home if he's doing okay, but please check and make sure that he's safe."

"Definitely, I'm worried about Lutz too. Let's go, Ralph." Tuuli took Ralph's hand and started to leave the room. When he glanced back at me with a worried look in his eyes, all I could do was give a weak smile.

Ralph had always been a caring brother deep inside, and despite thinking Lutz was just playing around, he was still worried for him. Deep down, neither he nor Lutz were in the wrong here, but their relationship was in tatters. I shut my eyes, thinking that it would be nice if when Ralph found Lutz they would have a decent conversation for the first time in a while.

The sun was setting by the time I woke up. Or to be more precise, I was awoken by the light streaming from the window hitting my eyes. Tuuli had gotten home already, judging by the sounds of someone preparing dinner in the kitchen. I drank some water from the nearby wooden cup to wet my throat, making just enough noise for Tuuli to notice I was awake and stick her head through the doorway.

"You're awake, Myne? Think you'll be able to eat?" I sat up with a nod and Tuuli brought me a bowl of bread soup. While I ate, she told me what had happened at the store.

"Lutz was at the store and doing his job like normal. He seemed fine."

"Okay. That's a relief." I felt immensely glad that we knew where he was and the worst-case scenario of him getting lost and wrapped

up in something had been avoided.

“Ralph tried to drag Lutz home after seeing him, but Lutz told him not to get in the way of his job. That made Ralph really mad, and after a shouting match he just stormed off, yelling at Lutz that he could do whatever he wanted to. And then... His dad is saying not to bother with him since he’s at his job.”

It felt as if Tuuli had just explained to me the exact moment that Lutz’s family had been damaged permanently beyond repair. I felt my heart clench.

“I know you’re worried about him, but don’t go check on him until you’re feeling better, okay?”

“...Okay.”

The next day, Gil came to get me instead of Lutz. Apparently Lutz had asked him to walk me to the temple instead of him for a while, though I couldn’t go with him anyway since I was still too sick to go to the temple. Gil peered at me with worry as I remained in bed.

“Sister Myne, your fever still hasn’t gone down?”

“Mhm. I’ll need to be careful for a day even if it goes down, so could you come again three days from now?” Gil knelt by the back of the bed, took my hand, and brought his face close to it as if preparing to kiss it. But instead he pressed his forehead against it and fluently chanted a prayer.

“May Sister Myne have the divine protection of Heilschmerz, the Goddess of Healing.”

“Thank you. May you too be blessed by the gods.”

Gil left reluctantly, and returned three days later as he’d promised. My fever was gone and my parents said I could go, so I went to the temple with him. It felt weird leaving without Lutz and I couldn’t shake an uneasy feeling. After climbing down the stairs and leaving the building, I saw Lutz’s mom Karla doing laundry by the well. I rushed over to her.

“Mrs. Karla, is Lutz back yet?”

She shook her head silently. There was no trace of her normal energy or friendly overbearing attitude. She just looked tired to the bone.

“Myne, do you know how Lutz is doing?”

“I heard a little from Ralph and Tuuli, but that’s it since I’ve been sick with a fever for days. I was thinking about going to the store today and checking up on him.”

“Okay. Could you tell me if he’s doing okay?”

I agreed, despite thinking she should just go see him herself, and left the plaza with Gil.

“Gil, we’re going to stop at the store, okay? I want to see Lutz.”

“If that’s what you want, Sister Myne, sure. But I dunno why that

lady's so worried, kids don't need parents to survive. Nobody at the orphanage has parents, so yeah."

"...True." Some of those kids were dying the first time I saw them, but I didn't mention that. If the orphans didn't have the mindset that kids don't need parents to survive, they would probably fall apart.

Mark welcomed us with a smile when we arrived at the Gilberta Company. Lutz was behind him, writing something on his diptych.

"Good morning, Myne. Feeling better?"

"Good morning, Mr. Mark. My fever's finally gone down. But that's not important right now. I want to talk about Lu—"

"Please save that conversation for the office. The employees are a bit on edge, due to Lutz's relatives causing stir these past few days." Mark interrupted me with a gentle smile.

It seemed that Ralph wasn't the only one who had come to the store and tried dragging Lutz home. Disheveled poor people coming to a fancy store for nobles and causing a commotion each day was hardly good for its image. At this rate, Lutz's position in the store would get worse by the day. I shut my mouth and nodded.

"Master Benno, Myne wishes to talk, so I have brought her here."

"...I don't remember making my office a counseling room."

"I am aware." Mark was smiling, but exuding an aura that made it clear that he wouldn't take no for an answer. Benno caved in with a nod and a sigh.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Benno. We can talk outside if you want."

"Nah, here is fine. Last night Lutz's mom came all the way to my place on the second floor to demand I give Lutz back, shouting about me being a kidnapper and all that. Mark flipped out and sent her packing."

"My apologies, Master Benno."

I shuddered at the thought of Karla shouting with all her size and energy. Then, I trembled in genuine fear at the description of Mark having "flipped out." What had he said to send Karla packing? Maybe she had looked exhausted and dead inside due to Mark's anger. I got the feeling it would be for the best if I never knew what he had said, and so I turned to Lutz.

"How are things for you right now, Lutz? Are you living with Mr. Benno?"

"Whaddaya mean? I'm living in that attic room where all my stuff is. I didn't even know Mom came until this morning."

Mark had apparently sent her off before she even got to see Lutz. That was why she had asked me to tell her how he was doing. Honestly, that made me feel kinda bad.

"...Wait, wait. The attic room?"

"Yeah, it's all I got. Where else would I go?"

Lutz said he was living in the attic room, which put him on the same level as a live-in apprentice. In other words, despite having said he would adopt Lutz, Benno wasn't helping him at all.

"What's the meaning of this, Mr. Benno?! Weren't you going to adopt Lutz?!"

"...Master Benno, adopting me? Huh? Where's that coming from?"

Judging by how Lutz's confusion, Benno hadn't told him anything. I glared up at Benno, and he too glared back down at me with angry eyes.

"You idiot!" he thundered. "You think I could just up and adopt him without his parents' permission?! No! This is the path Lutz chose and he's walking it. And how many times have I told you to think before you speak?! Now you've told him about the adoption at a time when his parents won't give their permission!"

Oh no! I put a hand over my mouth, but it was too late. Lutz's eyes were brimming with darkness. He had likely been living a harsh, lonely life ever since running away from home. His eyes were normally full of optimistic positivity, but now that he had found a target to unleash his frustration upon, he looked grim.

"Myne, did you know all about this?"

"I told her. I needed information on your home life and family situation."

"Master Benno..."

Benno's revelation made Lutz's eyes waver. He looked at me like a lost kid trying to find his place in the world. "But, but... If you knew, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I knew you would run away from home. I knew you would turn your back on your family. I care a lot about my family, and I didn't want to do something that would destroy yours."

I didn't want to harm his relationship with his family. But even so, if Benno would give him a home where he was welcome, if he would adopt him, then I thought Lutz should do what he thought was best. With Benno's help, he wouldn't have to suffer the hell of being a live-in apprentice until reaching adulthood and gaining freedom from his parents' interference.

But in reality, Lutz ran away from home, couldn't get adopted due to the need for parental permission, and was ultimately living in the attic like a normal live-in apprentice. Only five days had passed, and yet the darkness in Lutz's eyes showed just how hard it was for a kid to live alone.

"Are you saying I was wrong, Myne? I was wrong to run away from home...?"

According to Tuuli, Ralph had said: "*Quit being selfish and come home,*" "*Stop thinking about yourself all the time,*" "*You're the one causing*

problems for the store,” “Aren’t you satisfied already?” and so on. If Lutz apologized and went home, he’d be going right back to the same situation he was in before. His family would say that they were right, that he couldn’t survive as a live-in slave. They would say he was selfish after all. He would probably end up living life while bottling up all the frustrations he had, thinking that was his only choice. But I didn’t want to see Lutz like that, so I rejected the idea immediately.

“I don’t think you’re in the wrong, Lutz. How could I, when I know just how hard you’ve been working? When I know how much frustration you’ve been bottling up inside?”

“Whew...” Lutz let out a relieved sigh. I peered into his jade-green eyes and took his hand.

“No matter what happens, Lutz, I’m on your side. I’m still here right now because you said you accepted me as I was back then.”

In the past I had also felt that I was alone with no allies, to the point of retreating into my shell. I felt uneasy every day, feeling I had no place in the world, and was ultimately saved by Lutz saying he was fine with me being his Myne. I wanted Lutz to feel even a fraction of the relief I felt that day.

“I’ll say the same thing you said to me. Lutz, you’re fine the way you are. I’ll support you through everything. Just like you saved me, I’ll do everything I can to save you, so know that you can always rely on me when things get bad.”

With tears forming in his eyes, Lutz hugged me with a trembling smile. “Haha...! I don’t think there’s anyone less reliable than you, Myne. You’d probably crumble the second I tried leaning on you,” said Lutz tearfully while indeed nearly crushing me with his hug.

I pouted with embarrassment a bit and patted his back. “I’ll be able to help a little. Like, how about I give you lunch at the temple...? You can’t cook food in the attic since you don’t have a kitchen, right?”

“...That’s just eating together, you’re not making it.” I heard Lutz sniff beside me while rubbing his nose. But still, his voice sounded a lot brighter than it was a second ago. I smiled.

“Shouldn’t you be saying ‘I owe you my greatest thanks, Sister Myne’ right now?”

Lutz cackled and lifted his up head, now wearing a smile. His normal, optimistic smile. Maybe I had helped him a little after all.

“...Hey, you two done yet?” Benno called out to us with an incredibly exasperated, annoyed expression, his head resting against his chin in a classic bored posture.

I tilted my head while still patting Lutz’s back. “...I mean, we can be. Why?”

“Get back to work already. You’re distracting me.” Benno shooed us away and Lutz hurriedly separated from me before leaving the

room. I figured I would leave too after a quick goodbye, but Benno eyed the door Lutz just left through and continued to speak.

“Myne, I sympathize with wanting to improve Lutz’s situation as soon as possible, but given how his mom was acting yesterday, the adoption talk will have to wait until things have cooled down.” Benno’s calm assessment of the situation made me feel like I was swallowing a bitter pill. “It looks like he’s gonna be living like this for a while, and things might be fine for now, but a bad living situation hurts the spirit. I can’t do anything right now since it’ll impact the store’s reputation if his family keeps shouting about kidnapping and being tricked. If you’re on Lutz’s side, do what you can to help.”

“...Right.” I thought that even if Lutz ran away, Benno would adopt him and he could focus on work. I thought that he would be able to go to other cities to help make plant paper workshops and finally achieve his dream. I never thought he would become a live-in apprentice and suffer more than he already was...

Just as Benno said, Lutz’s spirit would be worn down if he kept up this harsh lifestyle. He would beat himself up, wondering if he had done the wrong thing, and ultimately he might end up hating his family. Surely there was something I could do for him, just like how he had supported me. But nothing came to mind, and I let out a heavy sigh.

The High Priest's Letter of Invitation

...What could I do about Lutz? It seemed like the best thing would be for Lutz and his family to sit down, face each other head on, and say what they had to say until everyone could forgive each other. Lutz and his family had ended up so distant from each other because they had kept their feelings inside for so long.

“...Hm. Myne. Are you listening to me?”

I came back to my senses from my shoulders being shaken, and I looked up at the High Priest in confusion. He looked down at me while rubbing his temples and pointing a finger at my stone slate.

“You’re not making any progress.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I apologized and got back to doing math. Once I finished a chunk of calculations, I let out another sigh. Maybe I was only so invested in fixing this because I was blessed with a good family. Who could say if it would be better for Lutz to stay separated from his family if they were making him so unhappy? It was hard to say. What path would lead to Lutz’s happiness?

“Myne, you’ve stopped again.”

“Huh? Oh, I finished this part.”

“Then begin work on this.”

The most immediate solution was Benno adopting Lutz. That would give him a strong ally and let him focus on work, and it would provide him with a good living situation. But Benno couldn’t adopt Lutz without parental permission, and he had already said that his hands were tied here.

I considered inviting Benno, Lutz, and Lutz’s parents to one big meeting, but I doubted they would all get together to talk. And if the conversation heated up so much that Benno or Lutz’s dad lost control of the situation, who knew what would happen. I just couldn’t see it ending well.

“...I really am useless, aren’t I...”

“You certainly are. For once, you are entirely correct.”

I looked up, surprised that my murmurs had been responded to, and saw that the High Priest was looking down at me with a scary look in his eyes. He jutted his chin toward the bed.

“Follow me.”

“Um, High Priest. What about your work?”

“Fixing the calculator comes first.”

It's not very nice to call people calculators, I complained silently while following the High Priest into the lecture room.

It was as messy as ever, so I moved some stuff off of the bench to secure a place to sit. The High Priest brought his chair over again and sat down heavily, glaring at me with frustration. He always got a bit more emotional in here, as evidenced by how his glare was twice as sharp as before.

"What in the world are you thinking about? You have been letting out depressing sighs the entire morning."

"I'm sorry. It's not related to you or our work or anything. I'll try to focus on work more." If I told him I was too worried about Lutz to focus, the lecture would last even longer. I therefore tried to end the lecture as soon as possible while showing that I was sorry, but the High Priest just rested his head on his fist and eyed me with annoyance.

"As it is interfering with our work, it is not irrelevant."

...Can't argue with that. I averted my gaze from his narrowed golden eyes. If speaking meant being called a thoughtless idiot, it was better not to say anything at all. I kept my silence and eventually the High Priest stood up with a sigh, walked up to me, and pinched my cheek.

"How do you expect me to do my work while there is a depressed child beside me?"

I hadn't noticed since he treated me like a walking calculator, but apparently he was, in fact, worried about me. I looked up at the High Priest, who was as aloof and hard to understand as ever, when suddenly it struck me. He had been raised as a noble. I knew that due to a political purge the number of nobles had decreased drastically, leading to those in the temple being adopted and married away. That probably meant the High Priest knew a lot about adoptions.

"High Priest, do you know if there's a way for someone to get adopted without parental permission?" I asked, causing the High Priest to raise an eyebrow in surprise.

"What? You've chosen to leave the family you care so much about?"

"Sheesh! I'm not talking about me, duh!" His unexpected misinterpretation surprised me so much that I dropped my noble dialect entirely. I slapped a hand over my mouth, but the High Priest just murmured "Naturally" without a word about it. He adjusted his place in his seat, put his arms on each armrest, and linked his fingers in front of his stomach.

"...Then who? There are some methods for that, depending on the situation."

"There are?!" I stood up in surprise, and the High Priest nodded

while gesturing at me to sit back down.

“My position here gives me a degree of authority, which can be used to bend the rules. Though I will not do so for just anyone.”

“It’s about Benno adopting Lutz.” There was now a glimmer of hope for improving Lutz’s living situation. I sat up straight and looked at the High Priest with hopeful eyes.

“Those are both very important people to you, I believe. Tell me more.”

I gave the High Priest a summary of events, answering question after detailed question until he was satisfied. He closed his eyes to organize his thoughts, then slowly opened them.

“Hm. Lutz’s family opposed his employment as an apprentice merchant and refused to allow him to leave the city, which ultimately led to him running away from home. Benno hopes to adopt Lutz given his bright future, but his parents refuse even that. Your hope is to improve his living situation, with your ideal solution including a resolution to the conflict with his family. You believe the fastest solution will be to have Benno adopt him. Everything correct so far?”

“Yes.” The fact that he remembered all that without taking notes showed just how good his memory was. My awe for his memory distracted me, but the High Priest kept going.

“Lutz’s father said to ‘not bother’ with Lutz since he was going to work, yes? He didn’t say that Lutz couldn’t come back?”

“...I don’t think he did, at least. But this is all hearsay from Tuuli, I can’t say anything for sure.” The most unfortunate part about explaining the situation to the High Priest was that I only had secondhand exposure to the thoughts of his parents. I had talked to Lutz and heard Benno’s thoughts. But I only knew his parents’ opinion from Lutz, Ralph, and Tuuli; I hadn’t spoken to them myself.

“...It would be somewhat tenuous, but if Lutz is taken into the orphanage as an abandoned child, the director of the orphanage could give permission in the place of his parents, enabling Benno to adopt him if he applied to the orphanage.”

“What?! And I’m the director of the orphanage! Let’s go ahead and send Lutz to the orphanage!” *Wow, I’m amazing! I’m glad I decided to be the orphanage director!* I stood up with pure excitement, but once again the High Priest gestured at me to sit down.

“Contain yourself. Myne, you need to learn to listen until the other party is finished. Perhaps you fail so often because you jump to conclusions and do not let others finish speaking.”

His extremely accurate and reasonable assertion forced me to sit down without any room for argument. *You know. Somehow, I feel like the High Priest is starting to understand me better than I do.*

“Although you have been given the position of orphanage

director, you are still a minor. Your signature alone would not be sufficient to approve an adoption.”

“In that case, what happens if someone actually does come to adopt an orphan?” *I’m the orphanage director, but not even my signature is useful...* I slumped my shoulders sadly, but in the corner of my mind I knew it would be unreasonable for a kid reliant on their parents to bear that much responsibility.

“As your signature will not suffice, the duty will fall on me, your superior.”

“High Priest, please. Sign the papers for Lutz’s adoption.”

The High Priest let out a deliberate sigh. “I do not mind providing the signature. But you spoke entirely from the perspective of Lutz, a child. I will not decide that a child has been abandoned from his word alone. In order to bring him to the orphanage as an abandoned child, I will need to talk to his parents.”

“Wha? But how?” He made it sound so simple, but I wasn’t sure how he intended to talk to Lutz’s parents. I tilted my head in confusion and he looked at me with utter disbelief.

“What do you mean, how? If you wish to talk to someone, you need merely summon them. What is there to be confused about?”

“...I forgot just how powerful authority is.” If you wanted to talk to someone, just summon them to you. That was common sense in the temple. I slumped my shoulders, remembering how my parents had been summoned to the temple themselves. Why had I even bothered worrying about securing a place to talk?

“I will grasp the situation in full, and if I find your position agreeable, I will assist in Lutz’s adoption.”

“I thank you ever so much.” I looked up, feeling enormously relieved. The High Priest was giving a rare smile. Yet it wasn’t a chivalrous smile, but instead the grin of someone who had thought up something devious.

“To that end, you will need to do paperwork in the afternoon as well. No book room for you today.”

“...Bwuh?” As I froze in shock, the High Priest curved his lips into an even more amused grin.

“I heard from Fran. This will be more effective than the repentance chamber.”

“NOOOOOO!” *Fran, you big meanie!*

After I tearfully worked through the afternoon, the High Priest gave me the letters of summons as promised. One for Benno, one for Lutz, and one for his parents.

“Please deliver these.”

I took the wooden boards with a broad smile, knowing that they would help Lutz’s living situation, even if only a little bit.

Since Lutz couldn't come get me anymore, I left the temple with Fran. If I handed the letters of invitation over with Gil, it would look like we were children playing around instead of an actual summons. Lutz's parents would probably take it seriously with an adult like Fran by my side.

"I suggest we deliver the letters to Master Benno and Lutz first."

At Fran's suggestion, we stopped by the Gilberta Company on the way back. Mark guided us to Benno's office and called Lutz for us.

"Mr. Bennoooo. Who's the best? I'm the best. Cause... Check it out!" I ran up to Benno with a spring in my step and took out his letter of invitation with a flourish. Benno suspiciously took the board, ran his eyes over it, then immediately thundered at me with a furious expression.

"A letter of invitation from the High Priest?! What did you screw up this time?!"

"I talked to him about Lutz running away to see if he could arrange an adoption, and here we are. Why are you so mad?" My thoughts were that I had done something extremely helpful, so Benno's sudden thundering just left me confused and blinking rapidly.

"What have you done?!"

"Bwuh? Wha? Did I do something wrong?"

"Don't involve nobles in problems like this! You could get us all killed, or worse!"

Benno was furious, but I really didn't understand why. The High Priest was certainly a noble, but he was a reasonable person, and despite his aloofness making it hard to understand, he did all this out of worry for me.

"But I mean, the High Priest said he needed to do this to repair his calculator... Not to mention that I wanted to help Lutz out however I could."

"I appreciate the thought, Myne, but come on. Getting a letter of invitation like this is just scary." Lutz hung his head as he looked at the letter of invitation I handed to him. Benno, likewise, was cradling his head with his letter of invitation still in hand.

"You try to help Lutz, and the next thing we know the High Priest is sending out letters of invitation... haaah."

"Don't blame me. You said you couldn't help, Mr. Benno, so I just asked another adult for advice." I pouted my lips unhappily and Benno glared at me, his dark-red eyes gleaming with a monstrous light.

"Alright, alright. If I had used all my power to threaten Lutz's family and blackmail them into approving the adoption, this wouldn't have happened. My mistake."

"Wh-What are you talking about?! That's terrifying!"

“...Myne, if Master Benno wanted to, that wouldn't be a problem for him at all. My family's been damaging his store's reputation, and you shouldn't even need to think about whether he's stronger than my parents or not.”

Lutz's words snapped me back to reality. By this point I was just casually visiting the Gilberta Company, but Tuuli felt nervous about going to the north at all. There was a distinct difference in power and authority between the north and south. Karla coming here directly for Lutz had been a real act of immense courage, and Lutz's family not being punished for the problems they had been causing was simply because Benno had mercifully forgiven them.

“I was trying to resolve this peacefully for Lutz's sake, and yet here you go...”

“The High Priest will be peaceful too! He's even thought of a way to make the adoption work out!”

“Say what?!” Benno and Lutz both looked at me simultaneously.

I explained to them what the High Priest had told me. “If Lutz seeks refuge in the orphanage under the claim that his parents have abandoned him, then we'll only need your signature and the orphanage's approval for you to adopt him, Mr. Benno.”

“And that's where you come in, as the orphanage director.” Benno looked at me with a grin. I hated to disappoint him, but my signature was meaningless.

“I'm still a child, so it will be the High Priest providing his signature. But first he wants to talk to you and Lutz's parents to understand the situation in full. Hence the letters.”

Benno looked at the letter in his hand while stroking his chin, looking conflicted. “Y'know, seems like the High Priest has really taken a liking to you, huh? Most nobles wouldn't bother to deal with us commoners.”

“I'm apparently a very valuable calculator. His work efficiency changes dramatically based on how well I'm functioning.”

“Now that you mention it, Otto said something like that too. I might need to thank you for this, but I don't really want to. Why do I feel so exhausted...?” Benno let out a tired sigh and scratched his head. “You should go give Lutz's parents theirs.”

“Sorry, Myne.”

“It's okay. I was going to tell Karla about this anyway. But remember, since this is all based on you being abandoned and coming to the orphanage, be sure to come to the temple tomorrow.”

I waved Lutz goodbye and left the store, beginning my walk home with Fran. I planned to go straight to Lutz's place, but found Karla walking around aimlessly by the well.

“Mrs. Karla!” I called out and Karla's head shot up. She came

running this way immediately. Her once round face had thinned with exhaustion and I could see dark circles beneath her eyes.

“Took you a while, Myne. Did you see Lutz? How was he?”

“He was doing his job. He seemed fine.”

“That’s good.” Karla’s heavy sigh of relief made me painfully aware of just how concerned she was for Lutz. It made sense that she wouldn’t approve of the adoption so easily.

“Um, this is a letter of invitation from the temple’s High Priest.” I held out the letter to Karla. She looked at it with eyes wide in disbelief, her face visibly paling.

“...Why the temple?”

“Lutz asked to go to the orphanage. Since he was abandoned.”

“He’s the one who ran away from home!” yelled Karla, but yelling wouldn’t make the letter go away. A letter of invitation from a noble couldn’t be refused.

“After that happened, the High Priest said he wanted to talk to Lutz’s parents before accepting him into the orphanage, so... Please come with your husband. Since you might need to take a day off work, it’s scheduled for three days from now. He wants you to come to the temple at third bell.”

I explained the contents of the letter to Karla, since she couldn’t read. She squeezed the wooden board in her hand while looking between it and me.

“...Third bell three days from now?”

“Uh huh. If you show this letter to the guard, he should take you where you need to go.”

Family Meeting at the Temple

The date of the meeting arrived after three days of anxious waiting. I hurriedly went to the temple, changed into my blue robes, and headed to the High Priest's room. Lutz, who had been staying in one of my attendant rooms, was wearing his apprentice clothes. He stayed with me instead of in the orphanage at the High Priest's instructions, in order to prevent the real orphans from developing pointless hope.

"Man, I'm nervous."

"...This has gotten way too big for a simple family discussion."

By the time Lutz and I arrived at the High Priest's room, word of Benno and Mark arriving had already been delivered and a gray priest was guiding the two of them there.

Lutz's parents arrived just as Benno was finishing the long, verbose greeting made necessary by the presence of a noble. Just as I had heard, Lutz's father had the muscular build of one working in construction, though he wasn't particularly large. His skin was deeply tanned and he had the look of someone who worked themselves sweaty outside. He had deeply furrowed brows and sharp jade eyes that reflected his obstinate personality well, while his almost white blonde hair made him look a little old.

Lutz's father glanced at him, gave a snort, and then briefly introduced himself to the High Priest. Karla followed him to the seats offered to them, and jerked in fear upon seeing Mark and Benno sitting on the opposite side.

...Seriously, Mark, what'd you do? What'd you say? Have you already blackmailed her?

When everyone was gathered in the High Priest's room, the loud sound of third bell rang above us. The High Priest was standing beside me. As he stated his greeting, I looked at the small magic tool in my hand. It was a sound-blocking magic tool made to prevent eavesdropping. When holding it only a specific person could hear you, and the High Priest was using it today such that only he could hear me if I tried to speak. In short, he was telling me to shut up and not interfere. When I protested (so that I could help Lutz), he had this to say:

"What I need to make clear here are the thoughts and feelings of the parties involved. A third party such as yourself will only

complicate the situation by getting involved. Especially since you are biased in Lutz's favor and thus not neutral. You'll get in the way."

He was so blunt that I wanted to crack a joke about where all his euphemisms and aloofness had gone. The condition for me joining the meeting was carrying the magic tool, so all I could do was sit in my chair like a doll. Frustratingly enough, both Benno and Mark had agreed with the High Priest.

The table was in the center of the room and our chairs were placed on either side of it. The High Priest and I sat on the side furthest into the room, Lutz sat opposite to us, his parents sat on the left, and Benno and Mark sat on the right. After finishing simple greetings and introductions, the High Priest explained Lutz's position and his request. He had talked directly to Lutz and thus spoke of things that even I hadn't heard about.

"...And such is Lutz's position. Is that right, Lutz?" The High Priest looked at Lutz, who nodded while looking self-conscious about his parents' presence. I internally shouted my support for him. He clenched a trembling fist and opened his mouth.

"No matter how hard I work, they don't accept me. Dad fights against every one of my dreams, and—"

"DON'T BE A BABY!" Lutz's father, Deid, clenched his fist and shouted at Lutz. His shout was so loud I actually jumped in my chair. He was probably used to shouting instructions to his coworkers. His bellowing voice felt loud enough to echo throughout the entire Noble's Quarter, to say nothing of the High Priest's solitary room. I felt my heart tighten with fear.

He's so scary! Oh my god! My heart can't take this!



And it seemed I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Everyone tensed up and looked at Deid. Benno often thundered at me, but his volume and weight couldn't compare to the voice of a worker shouting outside all the time.

"You work hard? We don't accept you? How about you stop being a baby." He worked his shoulders and leaned forward toward Lutz, glaring at him so hard I could feel the pressure from here. His voice was loud and deep even when he wasn't shouting, so much so that it was scary to hear even on the sidelines.

Lutz paled after being shouted at in front of everyone, and since I was sitting in front of him I could tell he was gritting his teeth hard to hold back tears. I bit my lip with frustration, unable to speak to him no matter how much I wanted to, and the High Priest stood up from his seat beside me. He spoke in a calm voice that carried throughout the room despite its low volume, contrasting with Deid's bellowing voice.

"Deid, what exactly do you mean by 'don't be a baby'? Please explain."

"Huh? What don't ya get? Lutz is being a baby, ain't he?" Deid crossed his arms and shook his head, failing to understand the High Priest's question. His grimace implied that he had expected his statement to end then and there without anyone questioning it.

"Lutz feels frustrated that his hard work isn't being recognized, and you consider that being a baby. But I do not understand how exactly that is being a baby, as I have little relation with craftsmen and the ways of the lower city. Please explain so that I can understand."

"Ah, yeah, you wouldn't get it. Eh... Kinda hard to explain."

He could have blown Lutz off by saying that he should understand what he meant already, but that wouldn't work with the High Priest. Deid stroked his chin and searched for an answer, probably not used to saying more than a few words at his line of work.

"He got a job we told him not to get. Of course he's gonna work hard. Not even a season's passed since his baptism, what's there to accept? My stupid son's the one who picked a job he wouldn't get any help with. He knew what he was getting into. He knew he'd have to work so hard he'd spit blood and maybe never even make it to full time work. So I'm saying, why's he complaining about it now? Does that make sense?"

"Yes, that is much more clear. From that perspective, he certainly is being immature. Lutz, do you understand as well?"

Lutz gritted his teeth with frustration and lowered his eyes. On the other hand, Deid looked a little relieved that his position had been

understood. This meeting had been forced to happen entirely thanks to the High Priest's status as a noble, but now that people were talking, I knew that Deid had — arguably — a reasonable position of his own. That wasn't something I could have learned just by talking to Lutz.

"Lutz, do you have a rebuttal? Or will you accept Deid's position as justified?" The High Priest quietly urged Lutz on. He slowly lifted his head to look at his parents.

"I'm not saying you have to appreciate how hard I'm working. But at the least... But at the very least, can't you accept that I'm gonna be a merchant?!"

"...Pretty sure I already told you to do whatever you want." Deid furrowed his brows as if he didn't understand what Lutz was saying. He scratched his head, then jutted his chin up and looked at Lutz. It didn't really look like he was still opposed to Lutz being a merchant.

"Do what I want... Huh? Wait, does that mean...?" Lutz shook his head in confusion and Karla explained what he meant with a sigh.

"Your dad's saying he does accept your work, in his own way."

"Wait, Mom?! If you know, tell me!"

"How would I know? This is the first time I'm hearing him say that," said Karla with a shrug. It seemed that his family had communication issues not only between brothers, but between husband and wife as well.

"How am I supposed to know that if you don't say it...?" said Lutz, hanging his head weakly. I agreed with him. But thinking about it, Lutz didn't really say much about his position at home either, so maybe they really were just a family of people who kept their thoughts to themselves.

"Deid, may I take that as you not being opposed to Lutz working as a merchant?" asked the High Priest. Deid nodded, looking like he wished he didn't have to explain every little thing he said.

"I think merchants are scum and I dunno why he wants to be one willingly, but he's a man and he chose this line of work on his own. He can use his guts to follow his dream whatever it takes, even if it means being a live-in apprentice. But whining and running off to the orphanage? It's pathetic," he said with a scoff, then crossed his arms and leaned back to signal that he had said all he had to say.

On instinct I shouted "No, that's wrong! This all happened because of me! Lutz isn't trying to run away!", but nobody heard me. Nobody even looked in my direction. I turned to look at the High Priest, since he at least should have heard me, only to discover that he wasn't even touching the magic tool hanging from his wrist on a chain. From the very beginning he hadn't intended to hear a word I said. Mean.

“Dad, no, all this about the orphanage was just My...” Lutz began to say the same thing I intended to, then hurriedly shut his mouth. He squeezed his lips together, then shot his head up and glared at Deid. “Then why won’t you let me go to other cities for work?!”

Lutz finally brought up the core reason why he had run away from home: his parents not permitting him to leave the city. That was unbearable for Lutz since he had become a merchant specifically to leave the city, but even so, he was once again shot down with a single sentence.

“You would know if you thought about it for a second!” shouted Deid, but Lutz had ran away from home precisely because he didn’t understand.

The High Priest shook his head with a sigh and spoke once again. “But he doesn’t understand, so please explain yourself.”

“...Again?” Deid, looking worn out, slapped his forehead. Then, after mumbling that he was bad at these kinds of things, spoke while furrowing his brows. “You becoming a merchant and you leaving the city are two different things. It’s dangerous outside those walls. There’s bandits and ferocious beasts. It’s no place to be taking kids.”

“That’s right! It’s way too dangerous out there.”

Deid and Karla’s explanation floored me. I had only gone to the forest close to the town, so I never really knew this, but it was apparently very dangerous outside of the city. It was normal here for kids to go outside the walls to gather at the forest; we went so casually that it might as well have been part of the city, so I never thought that the outside was so dangerous that parents wouldn’t want their kids leaving the city.

Not to mention, traveling minstrels and merchants were so common that even Lutz could meet them on a regular basis. The inns in the east were filled with travelers going to and fro. That led to me associating the difficulties of travel purely with the walking distance or the inconvenience of horses and carriages. It didn’t help that I had frequently seen Benno, the adult closest to me that wasn’t my parent, leaving for other cities to set up workshops and handle other business. I never really felt like the outside was that dangerous.

...I still don’t really understand this world too well. About two years had passed since I first came here, but I was still as ignorant as could be. As I sighed heavily, the High Priest blinked once in confusion.

“I won’t say there is no danger at all, but Benno would be going to a city only a half day carriage ride away from the east gate. Walking would be one thing, but I do not see the need to worry about such a short carriage ride.”

“He doesn’t need to go,” stated Deid flatly.

Lutz flushed with anger and glared at him. “I’m telling you, it’s

part of my job!”

“Calm down, Lutz. Deid, what do you mean by that?” The High Priest stopped Lutz with a gesture and asked Deid for an explanation. By this point Deid naturally expected that, and looked at Benno and Mark without pausing.

“This guy said he wants to bring Lutz so he can help make a workshop.”

“And?”

“Why’s he wanting a lehang, and an apprentice at that, to learn that kinda stuff? It’s not necessary.”

A lehang apprentice was the practical equivalent of a three-year internship back in Japan. The focus would be on teaching them the fundamentals, the simple manual labor and the like. One might send a lehang to another city to work at a newly opened store, but they wouldn’t be involved in establishing a new store or setting up a workshop.

I knew that Lutz’s dream was to go to other cities, so I had just been glad he was accomplishing that, but from a normal perspective it really just wasn’t a lehang’s job to do that kind of thing. It was the job of a leherl, or a successor. Not something Lutz needed to do himself. Deid’s position that it wasn’t necessary for him to risk himself going outside the city to do work not in his contract made perfect sense.

The High Priest and I both looked at Benno simultaneously. He sighed and looked at Deid. “As I told you the other day, after thinking about Lutz’s abilities and my future plans for opening stores, I conclude that I would like to raise Lutz into my successor. Showing him the creation of workshops in another city is one part of that, and it is also why I would like to adopt him.”

“Hmph, don’t even think about it.” Deid shot down Benno’s suggestion on the spot. He then looked around at everyone and murmured “That needs an explanation too?”

The High Priest confirmed that it did indeed need one, backed up by a nod from Benno, who said, “I would like to hear your reasoning. If you’ll forgive my rudeness, you will be of no help to Lutz’s career due to your lack of involvement in business. Me adopting Lutz will be good not only for my business, but for his future as well.”

Benno’s words made Deid lower his eyes briefly. He then shot a glare straight at Benno. “You don’t have any kids, yeah?”

“...Yes, which is why I am considering Lutz as a potential successor.” Benno furrowed his brow, not understanding what him not having kids had to do with anything. He would have no reason to adopt Lutz if he already had kids.

“That’s not what I meant,” Deid said, giving a heavy sigh. “You’re

right that I can't help Lutz, and I'm grateful that you think highly of him." His eyes wavered as he searched for words, until finally he looked back and forth between Lutz and Benno. "You're good at running a business and I'd bet you're a skilled merchant. You've even got the heart to forgive all the trouble Lutz's given you. But you wouldn't be a good father."

He wasn't insulting Benno or slandering his name. But still, he was rejecting him. For some reason he thought he wouldn't be a good father.

"Please explain why you think he wouldn't be a good father. Does Benno have a bad reputation or something of the sort?" asked the High Priest, to which Deid nodded.

"This would be easier if he did," he said, then looked Benno head on. "No matter how good at your job you are, you're trying to adopt a kid not for his sake, but for your business. Nobody like that would be a good father. Parents can't think about everything as pluses and minuses. Am I wrong?"

Benno opened his eyes wide in surprise, then gave a bitter smile. "I see. You are correct. I am certainly prioritizing the profits of business above all else."

Benno was considering adopting Lutz because it would be the most beneficial thing for him and his business. Naturally Lutz's personality and other qualities helped, but when it came to a successor for his business, future profits mattered above all else. That was normal for a merchant, but it would be hard for Benno to protest a parent finding fault in it.

"I understand why you rejected the adoption. However, I am utterly serious about Lutz's future potential. Would you find a leherl contract more agreeable than an adoption?"

If lehangs were like part timers, then leherls were like managers that could eventually be trusted with the operation of a business. The security, payment, and work offered by the employer changed drastically.

"I'm thinking it's too early for that."

"Too early?" This time, Deid didn't even try to hide his annoyance at the High Priest's question. He shrugged with a frown and explained. "Normally, leherls are signed after you watch'm work as a lehang for a few years. Hasn't even been a single season since Lutz's baptism," he said, earning him a raised eyebrow from Benno.

"It hasn't been long since his baptism, but I have been doing business with Lutz for an entire year now."

"That a fact?"

"Yes. I imagine you are aware of the financial burden an employer shoulders by hiring an apprentice. When I first met Lutz, I had no

intention of hiring him. With that in mind, as a test to assess his skills, I gave him a task to complete that most would find impossible. However, he succeeded with flying colors, far beyond what I had expected.”

“Oh...?” Deid was listening as if he had never heard any of this. If I remembered correctly, at the time Deid had told Lutz to just become a paper-making craftsman instead of a merchant. Maybe he didn’t ask Lutz why he was making paper. Maybe Lutz just didn’t tell him.

“Lutz has shown himself to have the determination and endurance necessary to overcome the disadvantages that his lack of a merchant upbringing has given him. I want to secure his employment before another store does, and the sooner I begin raising him to potentially be my successor, the better. I value his work ethic, but he has a long way to go.”

“Alright then.” Deid nodded and then, after glancing at the High Priest who was starting to stand up, explained what he meant. “No matter how much I want to help him, I don’t know nothing about being a merchant. If you’re thinking you want to trust a whole business to him, that contract will do him a lot of good.”

“In that case,” said Mark with a smile, “I suggest that we immediately fill out the paperwork at the Merchant’s Guild.”

Deid grimaced, looking thoroughly displeased. “You merchants and your...”

“...Dad.” A whisper leaked out of Lutz’s mouth. His dad cutting himself off mid-insult was the cherry on top of the cake that had shown Lutz just how much he loved him. Tears dripped out of his jade-green eyes that looked just like Deid’s.

Karla was quietly sobbing too, and Deid looked extremely uncomfortable stuck between them. He averted his eyes from them and scratched his head. His expression made it clear that he was finally feeling the embarrassment of saying everything he usually left unsaid.

“Lutz! Apologize!” shouted Deid out of nowhere. It was hard to tell from his tanned skin, but his cheeks look a little red.

“...Deid, you must explain if you want him to understand,” pointed out the High Priest with a sigh.

Deid grimaced, faltered for a second, then yelled at Lutz. “You going crazy with your misunderstandings got this many people wrapped up in this mess. Apologize with all you’ve got!”

Deid’s words stabbed a spear into my chest. Lutz hadn’t gotten this many people involved — I had.

“I-I’m sorry!” Lutz and I apologized together, though nobody could hear my apology. Lutz’s parents were looking at Lutz, but the High Priest, Benno, and Mark were all staring directly at me.

“C’mon. We’re going home, you brat.”

Lutz rushed up to Deid, who gave him a solid chop on the head. Despite wiping his tears away with a grunt of pain, Lutz looked really happy as he stood beside his father.

“Guess I should say something too. Er... Guess I wasn’t being clear enough. You helped us out. Thanks.” Looking somewhat embarrassed, Deid thanked the High Priest before turning around and leaving the room. Karla took Lutz’s hand and they walked off together.

“Master Benno, let us go to the Merchant’s Guild.”

“High Priest, I truly thank you with utmost sincerity for today. It seems that everything has been resolved peacefully.” After giving a long-winded thank you, Benno left the room. He was probably chasing after Lutz and his parents so they could get the leherl contract sorted out at the Merchant’s Guild.

The moment Benno and Mark left the room, leaving only the High Priest and me behind, some gray priests came inside to clean up the chairs and such.

“Take care to hear all sides of a story before making a decision. The truth will always be distorted if you listen only to what one person has to say.”

“Understood,” I said in an inaudible voice with a nod, after which the High Priest gripped the magic tool chained to his wrist.

“Thankfully, it seems their family will be doing just fine.”

I blinked in surprise at his sudden words and looked up at the High Priest. Upon seeing my confusion, his emotionless, expressionless face twisted in a slight grimace.

“Did you not say so yourself? Your ideal resolution would be resolving the problem and returning Lutz home to his family,” he said, reminding me of Lutz’s happy, tearful expression. The thought of Lutz, who had been frustrated with his family problems for almost a year, crying happy tears while going home with Deid and Karla made my eyes tear up too.

“Mhm, it’s perfect. It really is...” Things had gotten twisted because none of them really talked to each other, but they still had love for each other. I was really glad Lutz got to fix things with his family.

“Myne, stop crying. People might misunderstand and think I am the one making you cry.” The High Priest, having noticed the gray priests glancing our way, made a much more clear grimace this time.

“It’s fine, these are happy tears.”

“Good grief, Myne.”

I tried to wipe my tears with my blue robe, but the High Priest grabbed me and told me not to wipe my face with my clothes. But I didn’t have a handkerchief, and Fran, who probably did, seemed busy.

Upon seeing me following Fran with my eyes, the High Priest lent me his own handkerchief with a very unhappy expression. His name was embroidered on it, and for the first time I learned that the High Priest's name was Ferdinand.

Epilogue

After leaving the temple, Deid headed south to the Merchant's Guild while watching Lutz and Karla walk together, holding hands. They were on their way to sign Lutz's leherl contract.

It was a result Deid hadn't even considered when he was summoned to the temple. To be honest, he was uneasy about what would happen at the time, but in the end everything got wrapped up just about as well as it possibly could have.

...All thanks to that High Priest. Deid himself knew that he wasn't communicating with his son properly, but he didn't know how to fix that either. It was precisely because a noble who knew nothing of the lower city's way of life got involved that he had managed to speak his mind in full despite not generally doing so.

...But still, why was Gunther's daughter in the temple? And wearing the same blue robes as a noble at that. The girl quietly sitting next to the High Priest in the same blue robes as him had unmistakably been Myne, one of Gunther's daughters. She didn't go outside much, but Deid remembered her clearly since she went to the same baptism ceremony as Lutz. He had heard about the two of them making stuff together, but not about her joining the temple.

Deid was certain he often heard Lutz saying he was off to go get Myne in the morning. They shouldn't have anything to do with nobles. He didn't understand why Myne was in the temple. But he did know that the High Priest had uncharacteristically gotten involved with matters of the lower city and gathered everyone for a discussion at Myne's behest.

"Dad, this is the Merchant's Guild," said Lutz while pointing at a large building located at one side of the central plaza. Deid pushed Myne into the corner of his mind and looked up at the guild. As a carpenter who worked in construction by trade, Deid had never set foot in the Merchant's Guild before. Normally only those who dealt directly with money worked with the Guild.

For a second Deid hesitated at stepping into a world unfamiliar to him, but after seeing Lutz walk in like it was nothing, he snorted and followed in after him. They climbed a narrow staircase and found themselves in a hallway filled with people forming lines who were all dressed like them. Deid had gotten uncharacteristically nervous for what awaited within the building, but in the end it was still a place

for guys like him.

Or so he thought, until the Gilberta Company trio passed through the lines and went further inside. At the end of the hallway was a metal gate with a guard. Lutz, Benno, and Mark took out golden card things and the gate did something with them. Immediately after, a streak of white ran through the gate and it disappeared as if melting into thin air.

The sight of Lutz dealing naturally with a magic tool made by nobles hit Deid with a strange feeling. He felt as if his son had already gone somewhere forever out of reach. He looked down at Lutz with his mouth bent into a frown just as his son turned around and held out his hands.

“Dad, Mom. Hold my hands. It’s the only way for people without guild cards to go upstairs.”

It had been so long since he had held hands with his son that they were much bigger than he remembered, which threw him off as they climbed the dimly lit staircase. At the top awaited the world for the rich, overflowing with wealth like he had never seen before. The floorboards weren’t bare, they were covered with a thick carpet, and the chairs in the waiting room were beautiful with fancy designs. Everything was clean. It was impossible not to feel how out of place he was. But Lutz, wearing his well-made apprentice clothes and talking to the young apprentice girl behind the counter, seemed completely in his element.

“What brings you here today?”

“Please prepare a *leherl* contract. I have my parents and the master of the Gilberta Company here with me.”

“Understood. And... Congratulations, Lutz.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Freida.”

Lutz acted and spoke entirely differently from how he did at home. Not even a full season had passed since his baptism ceremony. Deid had thought that wasn’t enough time for anything, but Lutz’s enormous growth was impossible to ignore. He was already making connections and paving a road for himself as an apprentice merchant.

“This is the contract for making Lutz a *leherl* apprentice.” Neither Deid nor Karla could read the words written on the parchment spread out in front of them. They couldn’t help but tense up, on guard against merchants exploiting their lack of comprehension to trick them.

“Lutz, read the contract for your parents.”

It was commonplace for commoners to screw themselves by signing contracts they couldn’t read. It made sense, then, that it was important for illiterates to have someone they could trust to read things aloud for them. Lutz nodded at Benno’s request and began to read.

Deid had heard from Karla that Lutz was studying letters on a stone slate over the winter, but he didn't know Lutz had learned enough to read contracts. Benno saying that Lutz was using his determination to overcome his disadvantages hadn't been a lie or exaggeration at all.

...Guess he wasn't being a baby after all. Deid was a bit impressed with Lutz as he fluently read aloud the contract and explained all the unique turns of phrase that merchants used. At the same time, it would feel kinda weird to praise his son for something he had been ignoring up until now, so he snorted dismissively.

The contract described how Lutz would be treated going forward. He would be treated as a *leherl*, but continue living with his parents for the time being. Most *leherls* signed at the age of ten, so once he reached that age he would live at the Gilberta Company like the others. He would be given a room to put his stuff and change clothes, and the company would provide his lunch. They would also provide dinner if he needed it. When work called for going outside the city, he would go with them at times. His pay would be increased by a small amount. The contract ended after describing a bit more about his work conditions and pay.

"And now you're a *leherl* at our company, Lutz. I expect you to work twice as hard as you have been."

"Yes, Master Benno. And... Dad, Mom. I'm really glad you accept me. Thank you. I won't ever complain or whine. I'm gonna be a crazy good merchant and make you both proud," said Lutz with a beaming smile.

Deid replied by saying "You better not whine. You've made your decision, don't even think about complaining," but that just made his son's eyes sparkle with a defiant light. *...Tch. Look at you, being a man.*

"Deid, Karla. I'm gonna ask that you don't tell anyone about what happened at the temple today," said Benno while handing the signed contract to Mark.

"You're talking about Gunther's daughter, yeah? Why was she there, and why was she wearing the clothes of a noble?" The only people who joined the temple were orphans who didn't have any family or job they could rely on. Becoming a priest meant signing your life away to live as a slave of the nobility. It was hard to imagine Gunther letting his daughter do that, when he was the kind of father who loved his kids so much he'd even raise a sick child like Myne instead of letting her die to have less mouths to feed.

"There's a lot of things in the world you're better off not knowing."

Deid saw Benno's expression harden as he looked at him and Karla head on with his dark-red eyes. Deid swallowed hard. Benno's look

had the pressure only one who was prepared to lose everything could have.

“Myne’s stuck living life with nobles now. People who can’t protect themselves from nobles would be better off not getting involved with her.”

“I know that,” said Deid before looking at Lutz. ...*So you don’t get too close with Myne either, boy.* Deid swallowed what he wanted to say. Lutz hadn’t even told his family that Myne had entered the temple with blue robes. He never mentioned going to the temple when he left in the morning. It was clear that Lutz was sticking with Myne knowing full well the risks of doing so.

Deid sighed slowly, thinking of Myne wearing her blue robes and sitting next to the High Priest — sitting on the nobles’ side. He then jabbed the back of Lutz’s head.

“Ow! Why’d you do that, Dad?”

“Stay strong, Lutz. Don’t lose sight of the road you’re walking down.”

“Huh? Er, right.” Lutz nodded with an expression that made his utter lack of comprehension clear. But nonetheless, it seemed to Deid that his son’s eyes were locked right on the path he had chosen for himself.

A Place Still Far From Here

“Tuuli, do you have a second? I want you to take care of a customer for me.”

“I’ll be right there.”

When the forewoman’s aide came calling for me, I made sure the stitches I just did were neat, then set aside my needles and took off my apron in a hurry. I quickly checked to see if my hair or clothes had any stray thread or dirt on them.

...*Okay, perfect.* Just as Myne had said, my bosses began letting me handle customers once I started keeping myself clean. Not only that, but ever since Mrs. Corinna struck that deal with Myne, she had started borrowing me from our workshop more so that she could ask me more about how to make hairpins. Our forewoman desperately wanted connections to the Gilberta Company, and thanks to my help on that front, she started letting me do more work all at once.

In the spring I had been one of the lowest lehangs in the workshop, but by summer everything had changed. I was happy about that, but now people in the workshop gossiped about how I was the only one who got to deal with customers. Rita and Laura even complained to my face that the forewoman had started playing favorites with me all of a sudden. They ended up complaining at lunch, too, leaving me pouting while feeling kind of uncomfortable.

“Don’t complain to me, I’m just doing what Myne told me to.” When I told Rita and Laura what Myne had told me about being polite and staying clean like a representative of the workshop should be, their eyes widened with surprise.

“Why does Myne know all that? She’s too weak to even go to the forest.” Laura was our neighbor and knew just how weak Myne was. But she was a year older than me and had barely met her, since she was an apprentice by the time Myne managed to get strong enough to go to the forest. She had only really met her when she pulled out Myne’s hair stick at the baptism ceremony and got anxious about it.

“Myne’s too weak to walk around much, but she uses her head instead and helps Dad work at the gate. She reads letters and does math stuff. Apparently she learned how to talk to nobles and rich store owners while she was there.”

In truth, Myne had started going to the temple as a blue shrine maiden, but Mom and Dad had told me not to tell anyone about that.

Everyone else thought she was going to help Dad at the gate or visiting the Gilberta Company to discuss hairpins. She did go to the Gilberta Company with Lutz sometimes, so it wasn't completely untrue.

"Wow, she can read? That's really cool." Rita opened her eyes wide with surprise. She lived on the opposite side of the city (with the craftsman's alley between us), so she had never seen Myne before. Rita being impressed despite that made me happy.

"Uh huh, Myne's amazing. She got to know someone from the Gilberta Company while working at the gate, which is how Mrs. Corinna noticed the hairpins Myne made. And then she even bought the rights to the hairpins. Normally Myne would be going to teach her how to make them, but I go instead since she's too weak to go that far."

I decided not to mention that Myne was worse than me at making the hairpins. If everyone learned she was bad at sewing on top of being sickly, Myne would never be able to get married. As her big sister, it was my job to stop that from happening.

"Hmm. You're so lucky, Tuuli. You got to go to Mrs. Corinna's house thanks to her, right? I wish I had a little sister like Myne too, maybe the forewoman would play favorites with me instead," said Laura with an envious sigh.

...But a few weeks ago you were saying it must be a huge pain to look after a sick little sister. I felt a little peeved at Laura's opinion changing on a dime, at which point I realized something and clapped my hands together. If everyone followed Myne's advice, I wouldn't be the only one asked to deal with customers.

"When I went to Mrs. Corinna's house, like, she was making a super beautiful dress. I asked how to make wonderful designs for nobles, and Myne told me what I needed to do."

"What? What'd Myne say?" The two of them, now knowing that Myne's advice was amazing, leaned forward and looked at me with anticipation sparkling in their eyes.

"She said I should go to the north of the city on my days off and look at what people were wearing, so I could note down what designs were popular with rich people. She said I won't know what's good if I don't look at good things. So, I was thinking of going to the north on my day off tomorrow. Want to come with me?"

"Yeah!"

"Me too!"

Rita and Laura both jumped on my invitation immediately. I sighed in relief. I had invited them for one simple reason. Unlike Myne and Lutz, who went north frequently to visit the Gilberta Company, I was still so nervous that I never had the courage to go further north

than the central plaza. I thought that maybe having two friends by my side would make it easier.

When the next day came, I finished breakfast quickly and grabbed the clothes I had washed and set out to dry last night. They were the summer clothes I had worn to Corinna's house. Just having worn them to the north once before gave me a bit of courage.

"Bye, Myne. I'm going to the north."

"I hope you learn a lot there. Good luck, Tuuli." Myne waved me goodbye. I honestly would have liked for her to come with me, but she didn't want to since Rita and Laura would be there. She said they wouldn't walk at her pace and she'd just be dead weight, falling behind and passing out.

I left home and raced down the steps to the plaza, where I found Laura walking around the well.

"Morning, Tuuli. Let's go! Rita's probably waiting for us already."

Laura and I weaved through the narrow alleyways on our way to the craftsman's alley. We found Rita in no time.

"Laura, Tuuli. Morning."

"Morning, Rita! I was so excited I couldn't even sleep last night!" said Laura, jumping toward Rita with excitement. We started walking north and almost immediately passed by some kids we knew heading to the forest.

"Oh? It's Tuuli and Laura. Going out somewhere for fun? Maybe the market?"

"Nuh uh. We're studying. You're all going to the forest, right? Good luck."

We waved each other goodbye and then followed the people heading from the craftsman's alley to their places of work. Along the way we talked exclusively about sewing and fashion.

"Hey, Tuuli. Talk about the time you went to Mrs. Corinna's house."

They wanted to hear about the clothes and stuff Corinna had shown me, so I thought back to that day and tried to describe what I had been told. But Corinna had used so many words I didn't know that it was naturally impossible for me to remember all the details. That reminded me of how Myne would always write stuff down on her notepad thing and look at it when she forgot something. ...*I might need to learn to read too.*

There were many carts rattling up and down the street of the craftsman's alley, but there weren't any carriages. Most people here wore the same kind of clothes we were used to. They were all patched up clothes bought from used stores. But as we approached the central plaza, the stitching got better, the clothing got more colorful, and the amount of cloth used increased. By the time we started to see people

wearing accessories, the plaza was right in front of us.

We entered the plaza while talking excitedly amongst ourselves. There were a ton of people heading from the plaza to the port in the western part of town, so the fashion was indescribably varied. Not only were the clothes fancier, but there were carriages on the street as well instead of just wagons.

Rita, whose house was on the far southwest of town, opened her eyes wide after entering the central plaza. "I don't usually come to the plaza since I can just take the alleys to the market. I didn't realize so many different people were here. And now that I look... There's a lot of blue clothes. Maybe because it's the divine color of summer?" she said, prompting me to focus my attention on the clothes in the central plaza. As she said, it did feel like there were a lot of blue clothes. I looked over the crowd while thinking back to what Corinna had taught me, when suddenly my eyes fell on a woman's skirt.

"Wow! That skirt looks amazing. Just a couple of pleats make it look so fancy."

"Myne's baptism outfit was amazing too, wasn't it?"

"Myne just pinched up the extra cloth since she's shorter than me. But they're the same thing, uh huh. I guess what matters for looking fancy is using extra cloth." I couldn't help but smile at Laura's point. It was true that Myne's baptism clothes had been super cute and fancy thanks to how Mom and I had altered them. But thanks to that, we got wrapped up in a lot of trouble. On that day I learned an important lesson: Fancy doesn't always mean better.

There was the Merchant's Guild and other minor guilds near the central plaza, so there were a lot of people moving around from a lot of different social classes. But if I paid attention, I could tell which social class someone was from by the clothes they were wearing. When I went to the second-hand store to pick out Myne's clothes, I learned to match clothes with skin tone and hair color, plus how one could show their social class by how they dressed. Lutz and I had picked dresses that would look good on Myne, but she had picked other clothes entirely. I thought back to that and pointed at a woman walking by with a blouse, skirt, and corset.

"Look, look. That girl's not wearing just a dress. If you have extra money you can buy three separate pieces of clothes, right? A blouse, a skirt, and a corset. You can change the feel of an outfit completely by swapping out one part, or like, switching the hem of a blouse, or changing lace on a sleeve."

"That's true! Tuuli, you're smart."

Well... It's not me who's smart.

"Just a bit further and we'll be in the north of town."

We made it to the north end of the plaza without any issue, but

everything past there was the land of rich people. Taking the first step inside was scary. We gathered together at the north exit and I looked over my clothes. Laura and Rita noticed that and suddenly fell silent, their expressions clouding as they looked nervously over their own clothes.

“H-Hey, Tuuli. Are we really going to the north?”

“You’ve been to Mrs. Corinna’s workshop before, so you’re fine there, right?” Laura pushed me forward, but I just planted my feet on the ground without taking a step. Corinna’s workshop wasn’t too far from the plaza, and she always sent someone to guide me.

“Is it okay for us to go to the north?” asked Rita nervously, grabbing my hand.

“U-Ummm... Well, what if we just keep looking at the clothes in the plaza? I haven’t taken a good look yet.”

“Agreed. There’s still a lot we have to learn here.”

The three of us walked around the plaza’s fountain, holding hands and paying attention to everyone’s clothes. We circled around it about five times while observing the passersby. But we had come all this way to go to the north, and it wasn’t so easy to stop thinking about it. In the middle of one rotation, we all subconsciously slowed down as we neared the north exit.

“Tuuli, why’ve you been walking around the fountain like that?”

“Lutz?! Wait, why are you here?”

“I’m running an errand at the Merchant’s Guild. You were here when I came and here when I finished, so I got curious,” said Lutz while pointing at the Merchant’s Guild and looking at us oddly. Now that he mentioned it, we really had been looking suspicious. Someone we knew had seen us walking in circles around the central plaza without leaving to the north.

...Oh no. This is super embarrassing. How should I explain this to Lutz? I cradled my head and trembled in embarrassment, but Laura just laughed at slapped Lutz on the shoulder.

“The truth is, Tuuli asked us to go to the north of the city with her to look at rich people clothes, but she got too nervous to leave the plaza. And... Wait. Lutz, you’re wearing really nice clothes. Where’d they come from?” It looked like Laura still didn’t know that Lutz had been hired by the Gilberta Company. She looked over his apprentice uniform from head to toe, tilting her head in confusion.

“...This is the apprentice uniform for the Gilberta Company. I’ve gotta get back to work, but you can come with me to the store if you want.”

“Wha? Really?!” We had found an unexpected guide, and I was overjoyed. With Lutz taking the lead we finally managed to leave the plaza and head north. Since only rich people lived here, there were

way more carriages than wagons and everything looked different from the south of the city where we lived. There were a lot of thin, tall buildings in the south, but here every building was bigger and once you reached the wooden third floors they started getting painted with pretty colors.

“Tuuli, haven’t you been here a few times?”

“I have, but coming here still makes me nervous. I’m not ready to go on my own yet.”

Lutz shook his head with exasperation, but still took us all the way to the front of the Gilberta Company. He then dashed inside, saying he had to get back to work.

“...Lutz really is a full-grown apprentice here, huh.” Laura looked up at the Gilberta Company with her mouth hanging open. Myne and Lutz always went inside like it was nothing, but to us it was like an impregnable fortress. Even if we wanted to go inside, the guard by the door would probably turn us away.

For some time we stood in front of the Gilberta Company, observing the people passing by. There were more people wearing frilly clothing than before, and at the very least, we didn’t see anyone wearing patched up clothes. Compared to what we had seen in the plaza, the designs were a lot more consistent and regular. That probably reflected the “trends” that Myne and Corinna had been talking about.

“I can tell the clothes rich people wear are amazing, but I don’t think I can make them myself. I don’t have the cloth to practice with, and I don’t even know how I’d start with making them,” said Rita with a shrug.

Laura nodded in agreement. “These aren’t the clothes our customers want, for sure. It feels like they’re out of our reach, really far away from what we can do. Maybe for studying we should just stick to the plaza.”

I had worked side by side with Rita and Laura for a long time now, so their opinions being entirely different from mine shocked me. I wanted to stay here and look at more rich people clothing. I wanted to practice making them myself like I had with Myne’s baptism outfit, even if it meant making tiny clothes for dolls. I wanted to get better with everyone and move to a better workshop when our next lehang renewal came. But both of them gave up immediately, thinking it was too much for them. I realized that, at some point, our goals and ways of thinking had changed. We didn’t share the same dreams anymore and that left me at a loss.

“Want to go home for today?” I asked, since they looked really uncomfortable. They nodded and we began our journey back to the plaza. But my legs and heart felt heavy. I walked while staring at my

feet, complaining on the inside.

...Why are we going home already? We came all the way here! I haven't seen enough yet. The two of them think these clothes are too much for us, but I don't think so. I don't want to think that.

After a bit of walking, I stopped and turned around. I could see customers entering the Gilberta Company. They were probably there for Corinna, since their clothes looked a lot like the examples I had seen in her room. *...So pretty. I want to look at them more.*

Thoughts of the dresses for nobles I had seen in Corinna's house passed through my mind. It was exactly because it was out of my reach that I wanted to study and practice more. I wanted to become good enough to join Corinna's workshop. Lutz and Myne had managed to get accepted by the Gilberta Company, so maybe if I worked hard I could get accepted too.

...I guess I'm thinking like this because of Myne. Myne always worked desperately hard to get what she wanted, and she always succeeded. Especially since she had Lutz, who walked down his own road in life even after his parents rejected him. I didn't want to settle for anything less. I didn't want to think something was impossible for me, or out of my reach. I wanted to charge forward on my own path.

"What's wrong, Tuuli?" The two of them stopped walking ahead and turned around. I looked up and waved at them with a smile.

"Sorry. You can go home without me. Now that I'm here, I want to learn until I'm satisfied."

The Gilberta Company was still a distant dream for me, but I wouldn't give up. At the very least, I needed to work hard until I could pick out better clothes than Myne. I would be ashamed of myself as a seamstress if I couldn't even beat her when it came to clothes.

I turned around and headed back to the Gilberta Company, then stood and observed the clothes of people passing by.

...I won't lose to Myne. Because, come on. I'm her older sister!

An Attendant's Self-Awareness

"Gil, you know what to do!"

"Yeah!"

Right after breakfast, we started preparing the workshop. Today we were going to the forest with Lutz, Gunther, and Tuuli taking the lead. Apparently the forest was totally different from the lower city. We'd learn how to make paper there, then make it in the workshop.

I was fine doing it just 'cause Sister Myne asked me to, but the other kids weren't too happy about having extra work. Kai, a kid I used to mess around with in the orphanage before becoming Sister Myne's attendant, looked down at his clothes and grimaced. They were second-hand and all patched up, looking even worse than the gray robes he normally wore.

"Hey, Gil. What's the point in making paper?" That was a question I didn't really have an answer to. I looked at Lutz, since he usually understood Sister Myne's plans the best. He noticed my look and started to think. Life in the temple was so different from life in the city that explaining things could be hard sometimes.

"You guys wouldn't understand if I said we're selling the paper to the Gilberta Company, huh. Let's see... It'll get Myne more money, so.. Ah, that won't work either. Money's not a thing here. Alright. Basically, you'll get more food to eat."

"Really?!" Kai's eyes shone with glee. The food situation at the orphanage had improved a bit thanks to Sister Myne, but it still wasn't enough. More food would make anyone here happy.

"Alright, let's go. Let's get this paper made."

"It's crazy, huh? All we had to do was follow Sister Myne's instructions and now we can make our own soup. We didn't have to sit around waiting for more divine gifts at all."

Kai and the others talking reminded me of how the orphanage was not so long ago. With more and more blue priests and shrine maidens leaving the temple, more and more former attendants returned to the orphanage. There were more gray priests, but less food. Everyone got less divine gifts and everyone was hungry all the time. No new blue priests came to the temple at all until Sister Myne, so nobody got taken as an attendant and nobody got more food.

"At first I thought a commoner blue shrine maiden would suck, but only Sister Myne would do all this, huh? Only she would tell us if

we want to eat, we should just make our own food.”

Sister Myne had taught everyone in the orphanage how to make soup and bought us ingredients to use. It was a revolution that upended the tradition of the orphanage of just waiting for prepared food to trickle down.

“You know, she’s not just sending you guys to the forest to teach you to make paper. She’s thinking that if you learn even a little bit about the food that grows in the forest, you’ll be able to save yourselves from starvation if it comes down to that,” explained Lutz.

Kai’s eyes widened, then he smiled a little. “I’m glad Sister Myne became the orphanage director. No other blue robe would try and make things better for us.”

“Then you better work hard and make some good paper for her.”

“Yeah.”

We distributed knives, baskets, and so on to the eager children, then got the pots and steamers necessary to make paper ready. It was time to go to the forest.

“Sister Myne, I’m gonna go learn. I’m gonna pay attention.”

“Yes, Gil. Go learn to gather and make paper well,” said Myne. I nodded hard and then saw that Lutz was waving his hand high, giving instructions to everyone since he was the most used to the orphanage.

“Be sure to stick close to Mr. Gunther. They won’t let you out of the gate if you’re on your own.” Gunther was Sister Myne’s father, and Tuuli was her elder sister. Or so I heard, but I didn’t really know what those words meant. Sister Myne explained that they were her family, people she lived with, but it just didn’t click for me. They were probably like her attendants that stayed with her when she was in the lower city. Or maybe they were like the other orphans were to me, since we used to live together.

...I didn’t understand what families were, but I hoped one day she could rely on me as much as she relied on them.

When we left the gate, the scenery changed instantly. Unlike the pure white temple, the lower city was brown and absolutely stunk. I was happy just to leave the pent-up temple, but some of the others were scrunching their faces up. Gunther noticed that and shrugged.

“This place isn’t like your nice and clean temple, huh?”

“...It’s dirty, smelly, loud, and there’s tons of people. Also, it feels weird that the buildings aren’t white.” One of the orphans spoke up and the others nodded while looking around. The orphanage felt cramped from all the gray priests being sent back, but there were so many people in the city that there wasn’t much more space. It was so loud here that it was hard to believe how silent they were told to be in the temple. The first time I left the temple, I got so excited at all the people and stuff to see that I actually felt a little sick afterwards.

“What’s that? I’ve never seen any of these things before.”

“Everyone’s wearing all sorts of different clothing. Is that a blue shrine maiden over there?” An orphan pointed at a woman wearing blue clothing, and immediately they all stepped to the side of the road and knelt down.

“No, no! There’s no blue shrine maidens or priests in the city! You don’t need to kneel!”

“R-Really?” Half-kneeling, they froze in place and nervously watched the woman, afraid that they were going to be yelled at.

It made me want to cradle my head. Sister Myne and Lutz had definitely felt the same way when Fran and I had visited the city for the first time. Those who had been sheltered in the temple stuck out like a sore thumb in the city. They clearly weren’t used to anything and spent all their time looking around, which was extremely suspicious. I tried to teach them what I could from my trips to the lower city.

“Only buildings for nobles are pure white. In other words, commoner buildings have lots of colors. Unlike the temple, there are no rules for how everything has to look. There’s lots of colors. People who are uh, rich? Like, people with a lot of money live here, so everything’s pretty, but the further south we go, the dirtier it’ll get. The people down there will be wearing clothes like ours.”

“How come you know all this, Gil?” asked a kid while blinking in confusion. I puffed out my chest with pride.

“I go outside the temple all the time to accompany Sister Myne on her commute.” In the past I had mainly just been sent to the repentance chamber by the caretaker priests. I never got attention for any good reasons.

But despite my pride, Lutz patted my shoulder and reminded me that I had messed up in the lower city plenty of times myself. “Don’t touch anything you see until I say so. The first time Gil went to the city he stole some fruit thinking it was a divine gift and got yelled at. Unlike the temple, there’s physical punishment down here. Don’t do anything that’ll get people mad at you. They’ll shout out of nowhere and punch you in the face. It hurts and it’s scary.”

Lutz revealing my past mistakes made the kids laugh. They chatted among themselves, saying “Don’t touch anything in the city! They’ll get mad!”

...*Tch.* I was finally earning some respect, but Lutz ruined it.

The scenery changed a bit again at the central plaza. The wood parts of buildings that used to be colored turned brown, and the buildings themselves got narrower. The clothes people wore lost their color and turned into the same raggedy patched clothes we were wearing. Even the attitude of people changed.

“How many times do I gotta teach you this lesson?!” A shout unlike anything you would hear in the temple shot through the air and an older man dropped a fist on a young adult repairing some building.

“Aaah! Physical punishment!”

“Aah, aaah! Tuuli! Is it truly okay to be violent like that?” A gray shrine maiden squeezed Tuuli’s sleeve, trembling.

Tuuli gave an uncomfortable smile. “Sometimes people won’t learn unless they get yelled at. And you don’t need to be scared. It won’t happen to you if you don’t do anything to make people mad.”

The further south we went, the louder the voices got. Shouts echoed through the air and gave the city a scary atmosphere completely unlike the temple’s quiet ambiance.

“There’s even scarier people in the alleys, so don’t go off on your own. Keep walking straight to the gate up ahead,” said Tuuli while pointing to a large gate at the other end of the street.

The orphans weren’t just listening to Tuuli because they were scared of the city. She was their teacher, the one who taught them how to make soup. Lutz and Tuuli were basically the same age as me, but they knew lots of things, could do lots of things, and were a big help to Sister Myne. The only things I could do without help were clean and accompany her on her commute. Everything else I was in the middle of learning from Fran, so it was hard to call me very useful.

Maybe due to how much scarier the south of the city was, everyone subconsciously sped up until we reached the gate. It resembled the temple gate, but was even larger. Apparently there wasn’t any more city beyond the gate. Before going through, Gunther held up a hand and told everyone to stop.

“I’m gonna go make sure they know about us. Hey, Otto!” Gunther disappeared into the gate and we were stuck at the front of it. Curious eyes fell on us from the other people waiting at the gate. To those who had never left the temple, they were in an entirely unknown world. I had been told my whole life that I must never leave the temple, so being outside made a sense of guilt spread through my chest. The other kids seemed to feel the same way, judging by how they were looking increasingly uneasy.

“You don’t need to worry, everyone. Dad’s with us,” said Tuuli, smiling gently. Guards needed to keep watch every day to stop people they didn’t know from going in and out of the city, apparently, so it was their job to look us over.

“They know the faces of city kids, but they don’t know any of you guys since you’ve never left the city. Dad’s a guard here, so once he tells them who you are, they’ll let us though.”

“Looks like bringing Gunther was the right call. I never coulda got them to let all these orphans out,” said Lutz while watching Gunther talk to a guard. I blinked in surprise.

“There’s some things you can’t do, Lutz?”

“Yeah, of course. There’s more I can’t do than stuff I can.”

It always looked like Sister Myne was asking Lutz to do everything, but even he had some things he couldn’t do. That was a big relief to me, somehow.

“Huh. I guess if I work hard, I’ll be useful to Sister Myne too someday.”

“You better. I can’t keep my eyes on Myne when she’s in the temple, so yeah.” Lutz grinned.

Kai, who had apparently been listening in on our conversation, blinked in surprise and peered at me. “You’ve changed. Not long ago you were hating hard on having to serve her. Pretty sure you called her a commoner brat.”

“...Yeah, I guess I did.” My life and the orphanage had both changed so much that it felt like a lot of time had passed, but in reality it hadn’t even been a season since Sister Myne joined the temple.

“I sure was shocked when Arno said you were gonna be the new blue shrine maiden’s attendant, man. You’re always stuck in the repentance chambers and I thought I woulda been a way better attendant than you.”

Everyone nodded with Kai. Each and every one of them had wanted to become the new blue shrine maiden’s attendant. Naturally, since becoming an attendant meant leaving the orphanage. But Arno had shot them all down and stated that the High Priest had decided on Gil. At the time I was super pumped to leave the orphanage and get a higher status than the caretaker priests always putting me in the repentance room. But my happiness was shattered in an instant.

“Hey, I remember how you all laughed at me when Arno said the new shrine maiden was a commoner, and that I wouldn’t get to leave the orphanage since she wasn’t even being given any chambers.”

“Yeah, I remember that. I was all like, what’s the point in serving someone who won’t even give food or a room? I even said a commoner blue shrine maiden was a perfect fit for you, and that I was glad I didn’t get picked. Good times.”

They laughed at me, saying they were giving her the most useless person in the orphanage since she was a commoner, and that frustration stuck with me when I first met Sister Myne. She was shorter than me, didn’t act or talk at all like the other blue shrine maidens, and I just snapped. I couldn’t believe she was supposed to be my master.

“You kept complaining about her not being a normal blue shrine maiden, and now look at you.”

“Yeah, now I’m glad she isn’t a normal blue shrine maiden. If I work hard, she recognizes that and compliments me.” It was because Sister Myne was a commoner where being rewarded for work was normal that she patted my head and complimented me just for cleaning her chambers. Thinking about her praising me made me happy. She would pat my head with her little hand while saying “Thanks, Gil. You worked hard” or something similar. It always made a warmth spread through my chest that made me smile without realizing it.

Nobody had patted my head like that after I was baptized and left the orphanage basement. Not only that, but I was apparently a kid who came to the orphanage instead of being born there, so the women in the basement didn’t hold me or rub my head much at all compared to the other kids.

“I’m gonna learn lots of things and be useful to Sister Myne just like Lutz is.”

“Mmm. But y’know, I think I’m a faster learner than you. And Sister Myne’s gonna be getting more attendants ’cause she has so few right now, yeah?” said Kai, and the kids around him nodded. But that caught me completely off guard.

“Yeah, yeah. Sister Myne appreciates hard work. We just gotta work hard so she’ll appreciate us too, not just Gil. If we work harder than Gil she might even replace him with us. Not like you’re doing much work at all right now, Gil.”

It was only then that I realized. Sister Myne was a new blue priest that had just joined the temple, so she only had the attendants given to her by the High Priest. She hadn’t picked any of her own yet. It was possible that she would start picking new attendants and replacing old ones soon. That horrible realization made my heart start beating fast.

Sister Myne has a heart filled with compassion, enough to care about all the kids in the orphanage. She would never be cruel to her attendants. And since everyone in the orphanage knows that, it wouldn’t be odd at all for everyone to start fighting to be her attendant.

...Crap. There’s a ton of people in the orphanage better than me. I felt a cold sweat run down my back. There were plenty of gray priests with experience being attendants and plenty of gray shrine maidens who could help her with the girl things I never could. Fran used to be the High Priest’s attendant, so he could do everything. He was already doing most all of the work himself. Delia’s a girl, and every blue shrine maiden needed a girl attendant to take care of her. Not to mention that since the High Bishop ordered Delia to be Sister Myne’s

attendant, she wouldn't be able to replace her now that she was doing her job seriously.

...If I didn't learn to do lots of things, I'd be the most useless attendant she had. But how? An indescribable sense of unease spread through my chest. I knew more than anyone else that I had been a real brat and that I was barely capable of helping her at all.

"We can pass through!" Gunther called out and gestured us forward, so the clump of orphans started passing through the gate.

I followed while holding down my throat. It was prickling so hard it felt like I couldn't breathe. I had skipped lessons for so long that everyone else could do more than me. I didn't know how hard I'd have to work to make up for that.

"Gil, you look awful. Are you feeling sick or something?"

"Lutz. I dunno if I'll ever be able to help Myne out, no matter how hard I work. She might switch me out for someone else..." I confessed my worries to Lutz, who blinked in surprise.

"Don't be stupid," he said, shaking his head and going through the gate.

I didn't understand. ...*What'd he mean by that? Am I being stupid?* The dark tunnel of the wide gate felt symbolic of my mood. The kids were saying "This reminds me of the basement." "Yeah, it's scary." "So dark!" and their voices echoed surprisingly loudly. I walked among them, feeling helplessly uneasy.

...*How hard should I work? Is it too late for me to catch up to the others?*

After passing through the complete shade of the gate's tunnel and reaching the other end, we were outside. It was so bright that just opening my eyes hurt. When the pain faded, I saw scenery unlike anything I had ever seen before spreading out in front of me. I only knew the sky surrounded by walls, so seeing the vast sky expanding endlessly surprised me more than I could say. The kids around me must have felt the same way, as they all started shouting in awe.

"Woow! Amazing! Look! The sky's so wide! It's not a square!"

"It's very bright, and the sun feels more dazzling than usual."

"The sky makes me think of Sister Myne. This feels as bright as the first time I left that basement."

Their comments made me remember that day when Sister Myne cleaned the orphanage and everyone got to eat food with smiles on their faces. That was the day I was really glad that Sister Myne was my master. I felt proud to be her attendant.

"Lutz. I don't wanna quit being Sister Myne's attendant. I'm gonna be useful to her."

"You really don't get it, do you?" Lutz looked at me with his jade eyes filled with surprise and exasperation. "Listen. You're the one who

brought soup to the kids every day after Myne first learned about all this, right? You're the one who led the cleaning, right? You're already being useful to Myne. If you're still anxious about it, just try and learn to do more. Myne won't cut you off so easily if you're working hard to improve. You can start by learning how to make paper here."

Apparently, she would soon be in dire need of attendants to manage the workshop in her place as it got busier. Lutz, grinning, said I'd probably get more confident if I started managing the workshop that was so important to both Myne and the orphanage. The second he said that and gave me a clear goal, my worry vanished.

"Managing the workshop, huh...?"

"The Myne Workshop's paper-making is definitely gonna be vital for buying the orphanage's food, and it'll be Myne's most important source of income. Do a good job, Gil. You're her attendant." Lutz slapped me on the back and I looked up at the sky. It felt much brighter and bluer than before.

"Gil, Lutz, hurry! You're getting left behind!" Tuuli's yell brought me back to reality and I saw the kids running toward the forest with cheers and smiles, filled with the excitement of finally being free.

"We're gonna find stuff for Sister Myne in the forest!"

"Hey! Wait! I'm going in first. I'm Sister Myne's attendant!" I chased after them, and the kids ran away squealing.

"You're all getting too excited. Gotta save your energy for the way back," warned Gunther with a grin.

Tuuli looked up at him and smiled happily. "These kids really do love Myne."

Afterword

Hello again. It's me, Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 2 Volume 1*.

With Part 2, the setting moved to the city's temple. Myne entered the temple as an apprentice blue shrine maiden and neither her knowledge from the lower city nor her knowledge from her Urano days is helping her.

There's paradise in the form of a book room waiting for her, but there's a mountain of problems she has to climb. Her common sense not working there, her troublesome attendants, the horrible state of the orphanage... And worst of all, the fact that her poor health remains unchanged despite extending her life by offering mana to the divine instruments. Still, she would not survive in the noble-ruled temple without facing these problems head on.

She wouldn't be able to get anywhere on her own, but her partner in crime Lutz is sticking with her, Benno's giving her advice, and Fran and the High Priest are teaching her the ways of the temple. With everyone's help guiding her along, Myne is solving each problem one by one.

When Lutz's family descended into chaos born from a lack of communication, the High Priest used his ultimate ability — summoning the people involved to have a discussion — and solved the issue. With Lutz relieved of his worries and Gil working hard to be worthy of being Myne's attendant, the Myne Workshop Orphanage Branch is operating smoothly and well on its way to producing paper. Maybe she'll be able to finally start making books like she really wants to in the next volume.

Out of the requests for this volume's short stories, I picked the perspectives of Tuuli and Gil, both of whom have been changed by Myne's influence. There are some characters who never show up by name from Myne's perspective. It would mean the world to me if you felt how hard they're working to follow the path in life they've found for themselves.

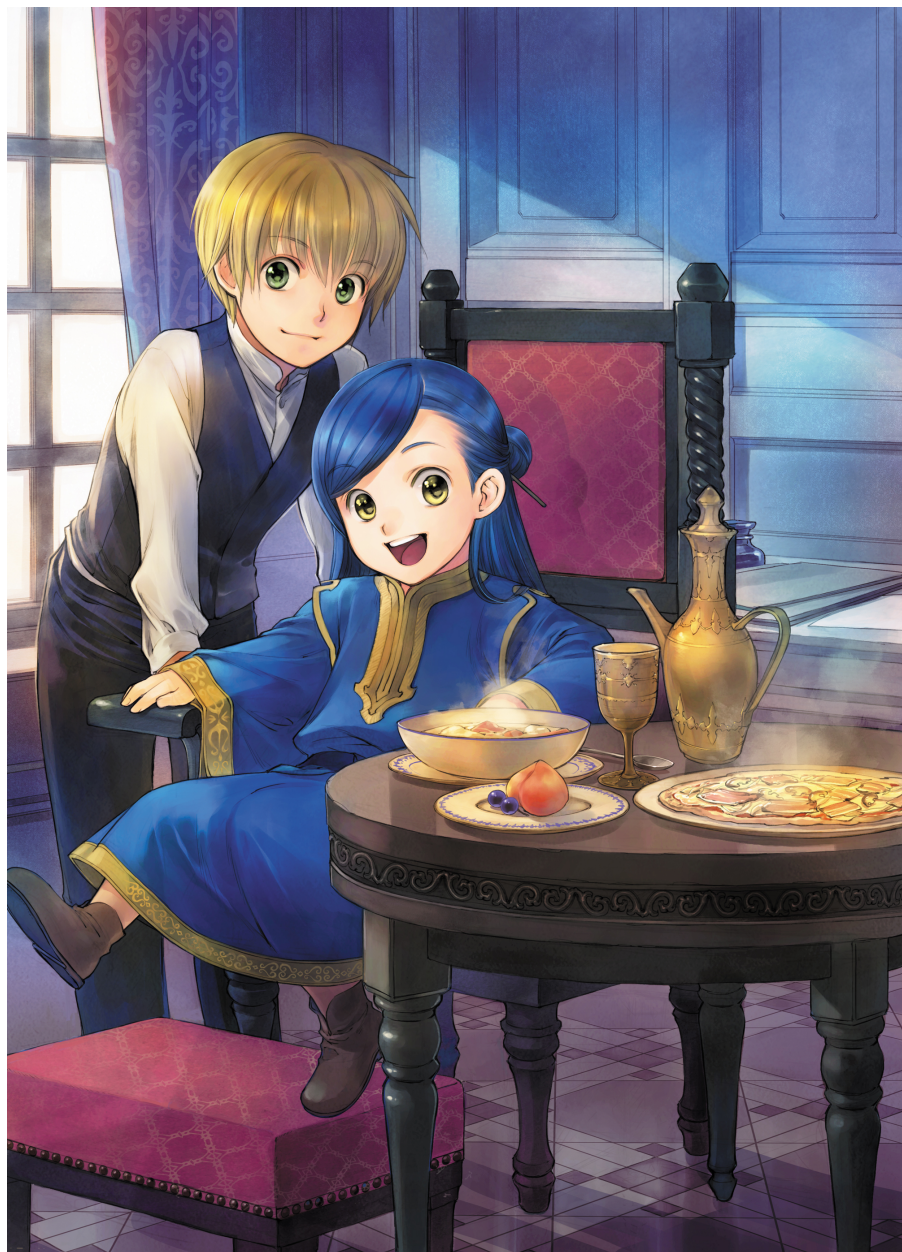
Now then, it wasn't as long as Part 1 Volume 3, but this volume ended up fairly long as well. This is the result of me experimenting and trying to lighten the load on your wallet by fitting Part 2 into as few volumes as reasonably possible. I would like to both thank and apologize to the noble employees of TO Books, who had thought the

books wouldn't continue to be so thick.

This time, the cover art showed Lutz and Myne. They're both super cute. I think Shiina You-sama had a hard time due to all the new characters introduced out of nowhere in Part 2. Thank you very much for your work.

As one last thing, I would like to once again thank with utmost sincerity everyone who read this book. I hope we can meet again next volume.

August 2015, Miya Kazuki







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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 2 Apprentice Shrine Maiden
Volume 1
by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof
Edited by Aimee Zink

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